

FILM REVIEW

Something's rotten in Sweden

A disgraced journalist and a tattooed hacker with scores to settle investigate a series of grisly murders in this sadistic Agatha Christie-style mystery

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Based on the first part of the *Millennium Trilogy* by Swedish author Stieg Larsson, a hugely successful European crime series, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* has made some compromises for its cinematic debut. Fortunately the compromises are few, and mostly superficial.

The first and most regularly commented on of these compromises is the title: In the Swedish original, it is the direct, if, rather pertinent, "Men Who Hate Women." There are plenty of men who hate women in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, and to some extent the women get their own back, but this is far more complicated than your standard exploitation movie. The film has many faults, but oversimplification is not one of them.

Sexual politics is at the heart of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, a title that titillates in a way that is just a trifle unsavory after you have seen the film. Sure, this is about a girl, or woman, who likes to be on top and who has a tattoo of a dragon down her back, but this is a very minor part of the appeal of this well-crafted serial killer flick. What there is, is a good measure of hate, mixed with a subtle blend of something that might be called love — depending on one's taste — as well as fear and lust and curiosity, and pride and arrogance, and then more fear topped off with another dash of hate.

Hate is not just the force that drives the villains in this movie, it is also what drives the hero — if Lisbeth Salander (Noomi Rapace), the bondage-goth-hacker who lives at the very heart of this movie, can be described as a hero. Watching coldly while the bad guy gradually ignites — no quick explosion to ease the pain — and burns to death in his overturned car is not what good guys are supposed to do. For that matter, neither is taking retribution by sodomizing bad guys with an over-sized dildo.

You get the idea. The dramatic lead, though supposedly subordinate to Mikael Blomkvist (Michael Nyqvist), a disgraced journalist hired by an aging industrialist to solve the case of a little girl who went missing 40 years ago, is not altogether a nice sort of sidekick. She has serious issues with men. Flashbacks of her past history graphically indicate that she is not a girl who should be crossed. The brilliance of *Dragon Tattoo* is that this vengefulness is linked not to super powers, but to a profound vulnerability.

Clearly author Larsson enjoyed playing games

with the established norms of sexual politics, and this is certainly part of the appeal of this European release (it is unlikely that an upcoming Hollywood remake will push these issues as far).

The relationship between hero Blomkvist and his sidekick Lisbeth is an interesting one, and long before the credits roll it already has you longing for a sequel. This is always a positive sign of strong characters well-realized, for in the end, the solution to the mystery is subordinate to the development of the characters, an idea that most Hollywood filmmakers have been very slow to grasp.

While character development takes place in the background, director Niels Arden Oplev spins a highly complex web over a wide range of suspects, most of them very unattractive. There are issues with Nazi sympathies, anti-Semitism, misogyny, torture, humiliation and indifference to the social underclass. As with many of the great works of detective fiction, such as the books of Raymond Chandler, the social background that creates the crimes is as important as the crime itself. Despite its considerable length — more than two-and-a-half hours — *Dragon Tattoo* rarely sags, and at times one wishes for a bit more detail to put the complicated jigsaw into context (the original book is well over 600 pages, and the film never gives up on its efforts to give us as much of the book as possible).

There are no great action sequences, a marker of the staid European film. Blomkvist has smarts, but no abs to speak of, and Salander, with her pugnacious sexuality, is not your usual female lead. She wears a spiked dog collar to an interview with a parole officer and has multiple piercings.

With its strong theme of sexual violence, *Dragon Tattoo* may offend some, but it is part of a larger fascination with the deeper extremes of the psychological spectrum that have already been so successfully exploited in the novels of crime writers such as Val McDermid and Patricia Cornwell. The focus on the story allows *Dragon Tattoo* to drift very close to being a big-screen treatment of made-for-TV content — perilously close in fact — and it is mostly up to Rapace's stylized yet intimate presentation of her character to give this film its cinematic force. She comes through more than adequately.



Noomi Rapace, top, and Michael Nyqvist, above, star in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, directed by Niels Arden Oplev. PHOTOS COURTESY OF FILM

Film Notes

THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO (MAN SOM HATAR KVINNOR)

DIRECTED BY:
NIELS ARDEN OPLEV

STARRING:
MIKAEL NYQVIST (MIKAEL BLOMKVIST), NOOMI RAPACE
(LISBETH SALANDER), LENA ENDRE (ERIK BERGER),
PETER HABER (MARTIN VANGER)

RUNNING TIME:
152 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

FILM REVIEW

The joke's on Zhang Yimou

'A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop' translates the Coen brothers' 'Blood Simple' into slapstick, but the comedy backfires

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Gone are the swordsmen, heroes and women crushed by a pernicious patriarchal system. Zhang Yimou (張藝謀), the once powerful auteur, has turned his hand to slapstick comedy in *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (三槍拍案驚奇) (previously titled *A Simple Noodle Story* in English), a remake of the Coen brothers' 1984 *Blood Simple*.

In Zhang's garish adaptation, the Coens' bleak and noirish treatment of human nature is lost amid boisterous and boorish regional humor.

The film is aimed at neither the international market nor fans of Zhang's earlier works, but the masses of China, who reportedly paid some US\$32.4 million to see the movie within three weeks of it opening there in December.

The Texan bar in *Blood Simple* becomes a noodle shop in the vast deserts of Shaanxi.

At the roadside mom-and-pop operation lives miserly owner Wang Mazi (倪大紅), his young wife (Yan Ni, 閻妮), her paramour Li Si (Xiao Shenyang, 小沈阳), an apprentice, and two dim-witted servants, Zhao (Cheng Ye, 程野) and

Chen (Mao Mao, 毛毛).

In the film's farcical opening, a Persian merchant stops by and sells a gun to the wife, who has had enough of her abusive husband. Meanwhile, corrupt police deputy Zhang San (Sun Honglei, 孫紅雷) secretly approaches the cuckold Wang to inform him of his wife's ongoing affair with Li. The husband is furious and hires the stone-faced Zhang to murder the adulterers.

But the plot takes an unexpected turn and the *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* moves to darker territory as the killer's hidden agenda surfaces, leading to a string of misunderstandings, double-crossings and the age-old problem of how to dispose of a corpse. The film abruptly changes tempo and style when, with a nod to the thriller genre, the murderer executes his crime with precision.

As Coen fans may notice, the plot closely follows the original, but the film is quintessentially Chinese, crammed with comical brawls and gags borrowed from the tradition of *errenzhuang* (二人轉), a folk art form from northeast China that involves storytelling, singing, dancing and clowning about.



Zhang calls on *errenzhuang* stage actors Xiao Shenyang (a showbiz sensation after his appearance on China Central Television last year), Mao Mao and Cheng Ye to elicit wows and laughs with tongue-twisting wordplay and acrobatic feats.

Sadly, the comical segments are farcical farragoes cooked up by the cast's flamboyant acting, silly dialogue and crude humor. Even the cameo by celebrated comedian Zhao Benshan (趙本山) as a boggle-eyed police chief is nothing more than a gimmick for cheap laughs.

It's as if Zhang couldn't care less about the discord that arises from panoramic shots of awe-inspiring barren landscapes (recalling the director's *Hero* (英雄)) populated by buffoons in gaudy costumes.

The film's highlight may be the cast's hip-hop routine, accompanied by Zhang rapping in his native Shaanxi dialect, during the end credits.

A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop assembles a legion of *errenzhuang* performers including Zhao Benshan, Xiao Shenyang, Cheng Ye and Mao Mao, as well as veteran actors such as Sun Honglei and Yan Ni. PHOTOS COURTESY OF SKY FILMS

Film Notes

A WOMAN, A GUN AND A NOODLE SHOP 三槍拍案驚奇

DIRECTED BY:
ZHANG YIMOU (張藝謀)

STARRING:
YAN NI (閻妮) AS THE WIFE, XIAO SHENYANG (小沈阳) AS LI SI, SUN HONGLEI (孫紅雷) AS ZHANG SAN, NI DAHONG (倪大紅) AS WANG MAZI

RUNNING TIME:
95 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Precious

Precious: Based on the novel 'Push' by Sapphire to give the film its full title, is not easy to watch, but if you are looking for a cinematic experience to challenge glib optimism about the human condition, this is the movie for you. The performance by Gabourey Sidibe as the title character, an overweight, illiterate teen who is pregnant with her second child, has already garnered intense critical acclaim, and other performances, including those by comedian Mo'Nique as Precious' mother and, startlingly, Mariah Carey, as a social worker, seem all of a piece for a movie that is on track to becoming a definitive work about the early 21st-century American experience. *Precious* picked up two Oscars, a remarkable achievement for a film that skirts the edges of art house. But be warned: In *Precious*, hope is a distant and difficult prospect.



The Crazies

It is a question why George Romero would wish to preside over this inept remake of his own 1973 classic of the same name. Romero, who has an executive producer credit for this film, seems content to watch Breck Eisner, the director of such innocuous adventure fare as *Sahara* (2006), labor through yet another predictable take on the zombie genre. Critics have uniformly been unable to find anything new in his vision in terms of content or style. Stars Timothy Olyphant and Radha Mitchell, who lead a band of normal people out of the zombie infected regions.



Date Night

Despite the well-worn concept of a couple from the burbs having romance injected back into a humdrum existence when they visit the Big Apple, early reviews rate *Date Night* highly. Steve Carell and Tina Fey get caught up in a case of mistaken identity and plenty of comic goings-on for a mix of rom-com and adventure, with Mark Wahlberg stepping in to provide the muscle. Directed by Shawn Levy, who hits his stride in this film, despite a track record that includes *The Pink Panther* (2006) and *Night at the Museum* (2006).



It's Complicated

The most complicated thing to work out about *It's Complicated* is why it is so bad. After all, you have Meryl Streep and Alec Baldwin in the lead roles as a divorced couple who have accidentally rediscovered their old spark, and Steve Martin as a possible suitor for Streep's affections. There is acting talent to spare, but no chemistry. Director and writer Nancy Meyers specializes in deeply improbable romantic comedies with a veneer of sophistication. Her credits include *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) and *The Parent Trap* (1998), which were reasonably appealing rom-coms that made good use of high-profile stars. Alec Baldwin as a laddish divorce lawyer playing against Streep's tightly wound celebrity chef wife would seem to be a surefire hit, but the whole thing turns out to be a damp squib.



I Give My First Love to You (Boku no Hatsukoi Wo Kimi Ni Sasagu)

Japanese tearjerker based on a manga series, *I Give My First Love to You* pulls out all the stops to get you reaching for the tissues. Main character Takuma falls in love with Mayu, the daughter of his cardiologist. The reason Takuma is consulting with a cardiologist? He's got a dickey heart — he might not make it past 20. As kids the two promise to marry, but after Takuma realizes that his life is likely to be cut short he begins to distance himself from Mayu, hoping that she will find a more suitable life partner.



Little Nicholas (Le Petit Nicolas)

Having had its Taiwan premiere as part of the Taiwan International Children's Film Festival, *Little Nicholas* hits movie theaters today. The title character is based on illustrations by Jean-Jacques Sempé for a French children's book by René Goscinny. Sempé's illustrations are hugely popular in Taiwan, rivaling Jimmy Liao (幾米) for the cute but bittersweet portrayal of an urban everyman. Humor and cuteness are all major selling points of this story of a little boy who suffers sudden anxiety when he faces the arrival of a little brother or sister. With the aid of school friends he concocts various ways of dealing with the competition. The film has already proved hugely successful with French audiences, and the appeal of retro European fashions and a slightly dated view of childhood innocence along with Sempé's established reputation in Taiwan are set to make this a family favorite here as well.



Taipei Golden Horse Fantastic Film Festival (台北金馬奇幻影展)

Organized by the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival (台北金馬影展), Golden Horse Fantastic celebrates the wacky, bloody and sexy aspects of cinema with a program that focuses mostly on B-movies and horror flicks, along with a mini retrospective on Roman Polanski's early works and a segment of movies selected by Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien (侯孝賢) titled Hou Hsiao-hsien's Favorite Fantasy Films. Check out www.gfff.org.tw for more information. NT\$160 tickets are available at the door or through ibon kiosks at 7-Eleven stores. Runs until April 22.