

FILM REVIEW

Film Notes

THE A-TEAM

DIRECTED BY:
JOE CARNAHANSTARRING:
LIAM NEESON (HANNIBAL),
JESSICA BIEL (CHARISA SOSA),
QUINTON "RAMPAGE" JACKSON
(B.A. BARACUS), BRADLEY
COOPER (FACE), SHARLTO COPLEY
(MURDOCK), PATRICK WILSON
(LYNCH), GERALD MCRANEY
(GENERAL MORRISON),
BRIAN BLOOM (PIKE)RUNNING TIME:
119 MINUTESTAIWAN RELEASE:
CURRENTLY SHOWING

Pity the fool who expects too much from 'The A-Team'

Resurrected after 20 years, the motley crew takes on the baddies in a film full of absurdities and fantastic plot twists

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Bringing *The A-Team*, the 1980s action TV series, to the big screen 20 or more years down the track is yet another instance of the poverty of Hollywood's imagination. It is, therefore, a pleasant surprise to discover that the film isn't wholly terrible. But neither is it good. As two hours of innocuous and forgettable action to help down the popcorn, it is perfectly acceptable.

It's obvious from the first few

minutes that the *The A-Team* is going for the charm offensive rather than the adrenalin rush to draw in its audience, and it clearly wants to include the very young.

With tongue very firmly in cheek, its heroic characters are even less real than many a recent super hero, who, directors are keen to point out, exhibit moral failings and human weaknesses. The members of the A-Team — Colonel John "Hannibal" Smith, Lieutenant Templeton "Faceman" Peck, Sergeant Bosco Albert "B.A." (Bad Attitude) Baracus, Captain H.M. "Howling Mad" Murdock — have no such problems. Their nicknames are about as deep as the characters get.

The story unfolds against the backdrop of the Iraq War. A batch of plates used to print US dollars is the prize being sought not just by the Iraqis, but various nefarious elements within the US defense establishment.

The happy-go-lucky A-Team is pitted against a black ops unit led by Pike (Brian Bloom), the

mad villain of the piece. There is a shadowy CIA connection with Patrick Wilson as Colonel Lynch and a romantic interest in the shape of Captain Charissa Sosa (Jessica Biel), who is included as eye candy for older kids in the audience.

That said, *The A-Team* doesn't take itself too seriously. Like many action movies, it cheerfully demands a total suspension of disbelief, playing fast and loose with the laws of physics, and amid the action and fantastic plot twists, seems to hope that audiences will ignore the story's gaping holes and absurdities.

To a large extent that ploy is successful. An extended scene in which the team uses a tank to make a midair escape from a transport aircraft is laugh-out-loud funny. While the dialog isn't razor-sharp, there are a few good lines, and the comedy on the whole is broad and visual.

For an action film with a high body count, there is very little actual violence, and what



Who doesn't love it when a plan comes together?

PHOTOS COURTESY OF 21ST CENTURY FOX

violence there is comes rendered in an almost cartoonish style. This may be as good a remedy as any to the bloody violence of many recent adventure films, yet the result is not a return to an age of greater innocence but a simple lack of urgency.

And that is *The A-Team's* greatest problem — it wants

to appeal to a wide audience, including young children, as evidenced by the range of action figures that have been released in conjunction with the film (suitable for children 6 and up). Younger audiences may find the madcap action enough of a joy ride, but for action junkies, *The A-Team* fails to engage the mind or the senses.

RESTAURANTS

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

BY CATHERINE SHU

Danny and Company

Address: 33, Ln 52, Siwei Rd, Taipei City (台北市四維路52巷33號)
Open: Noon to 2:30pm and 6pm to 9:30pm (last orders)
Average meal: Lunch from NT\$1,000, dinner from NT\$2,500Telephone: (02) 2705-9911
Details: English menu, credit cards accepted

Following the success of his steak houses A-Cut and N°168, chef Danny Teng (鄧有奕) has established himself as one of the movers and shakers of Taiwan's culinary establishment, and a master of all things to do with steak. With his new venture, Danny and Company, which opened last month, he has returned to his roots in teppanyaki, though this time he has morphed this Taiwanese staple into what he describes as "teppan cuisine."

Teng, who founded Ben Teppanyaki, said that in his early days as a teppanyaki chef, such restaurants were a popular place to discuss business.

"Many of those customers are now successful businessmen," Teng said, "and it's good to keep the tradition going, but at a higher level."

At Danny and Company, the teppanyaki theme is muted, but according to Ray Yen (顏宏毅), the restaurant's maitre d', many menu items cross the teppanyaki grill, even if they are finished in other ways.

Teng said that with this new venture, the emphasis has shifted toward seafood, which will allow him to use more local produce.

The ingredients for the day boat fish (NT\$1,350 for lunch set) are delivered daily from Nanfangau (南方澳) in Yilan County. Other dishes, such as Gillardeau oysters and seared sashimi grade scallops, emphasize teppanyaki's lightening quick cooking process.

Teppan-style preparation is ideal

for getting the most out of fresh seafood, but Teng has also used his wide experience of preparing beef to create a mouth-wateringly soft teppan-grilled garlic steak (NT\$980 for lunch set) that is presented simply and served with a choice of three condiments — sea salt, mustard and a homemade chili and cumin sauce of great subtlety.

The lunch set features an appetizer, a soup or salad, a main course and a dessert. A three-wine pairing menu is offered for an additional NT\$880, which draws on the restaurant's large cellar of nearly 150 labels that was built up by Yen, who also serves as the restaurant's sommelier.

On the meat menu, Danny and Company offers a wide range of choices from Australian Wagyu rib eye to American Kobe steak, and the intricacy of preparation is highlighted by a rack of lamb cooked sous vide and finished on the teppan grill.

Danny and Company has its own pastry chef, and the three-chocolate taster that was on offer the day I visited was a chocoholic's delight, taking in a wide range of textures and flavors, from light mousse through to sticky fudge. The same attention to detail and quality is also evident in other parts of the menu. A salad of baby green leaves, with its bold mix of sorrel, chervil and mache and delicate vinaigrette, was particularly vibrant.

The ambiance at Danny and



Danny and Company's new take on teppanyaki adds a touch of class to the Taiwanese staple.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DANNY AND COMPANY

Company, with its mix of polished wood teppanyaki counter (seating here is by reservation only) and its expensively simple dining room, is equally suited for a business lunch or an indulgent dinner.

Coeur (杜樂麗心饌)

Address: 108, Civil Boulevard Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市市民大道四段108號)
Average meal: Set meals range from NT\$1,200 to NT\$2,800
Details: Chinese menu; credit cards accepted
Open: Lunch 11:30am to 2pm, afternoon tea 2:30pm to 5pm, dinner 5:30pm to 9:30pmTelephone: (02) 2775-2345
On the Net: www.coeur.com.tw

Japanese restaurant Coeur (杜樂麗心饌) is run by the same company as Coeur Hot Spring Resort (杜樂麗溫泉莊園) in Wulai. With soothing ambient lighting and an interior pond stocked with gray-blue koi that match the slate walls, Coeur could be mistaken for a spa at first glance. Most spas, however, will not leave you feeling as stuffed as Coeur's overambitious set menus do.

The set meals are priced from NT\$1,200 to NT\$2,800 (Coeur also has an à la carte selection). My companion and I were told that the difference between the meals was in the rarity of the ingredients used, but quantity also factored in. I ordered the most expensive set and, after working through nine courses, including an hors d'oeuvre set, king crab salad, giant platter of sashimi, seared goose liver, grilled Wagyu beef, miso cod, mushroom hot pot and sushi, I was beginning to envy my companion's NT\$1,200 set.

It may have lacked delicacies like sea urchin, the goose liver or Wagyu beef, but it had a better balance of portions and flavors. For example, instead of the miso cod, my companion got tender herb-encrusted grilled lamb served on a fluffy bed of whipped yam. It was a welcome break from the seafood courses, which became repetitive. (The menus change depending on season and the whims of Coeur's chefs).

Coeur's cold dishes are much more satisfying than its hot courses. My hors d'oeuvre set was a compartmentalized



box filled with dainty portions of different treats, including candied almonds topped with niboshi, or tiny dried fish, thin slices of mullet roe, caviar-topped sea urchin on a bed of peanut-flavored tofu and seared scallop.

Each one offered an unusual and distinct mixture of flavors and textures. My companion's appetizer was the peanut-flavored tofu with steamed okra and soybeans.

Next up were the salads. Mine was butter lettuce and sliced fruit topped with two pieces of king crab, while my friend got spring rolls of delicate rice wrappers stuffed with cilantro and grilled tuna. Both of us preferred the spring rolls to my salad because the crabmeat was slightly chewy and tough in texture — and without the crabmeat, the salad was bland.

The gorgeous sashimi platters were visual knockouts. Mine was almost twice as large as my companion's;

standouts included lobster sashimi, sea urchin and seared scallops.

The aforementioned goose liver and grilled lamb were the best of the hot dishes. We were less impressed, however, with my set's Wagyu beef, which a waitress grilled at our table on a searing hot slab of stone. The presentation was unusual, but the beef's limp flavor was a disappointment, especially as Wagyu cattle are reared specifically for their marbled meat. We also thought that the mushroom hot pots served with both our meals were unremarkable — until the waitress mentioned that the lobster in them was recycled from my sashimi course. But the empty shells added no flavor to the broth.

Service at Coeur is polite, if a little disorganized. We arrived an hour and a half before closing time and were tactfully informed by our waitress that our dishes would be served more quickly. There were still several lags between our courses, however, which left us rubbing our increasingly bloated bellies and wondering if we were supposed to use the time to digest and enjoy Coeur's decor.

Coeur's set menus are delightful to look at and feature premium ingredients, but could benefit from some editing.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Killers

The lineup of uninspiring films released this week begins with *Killers*, which early critical reviews have mercilessly panned and may signal the demise of the promising actress Katherine Heigl from *Grey's Anatomy* as a serious contender for the epithet of Hollywood leading lady. The film stars Ashton Kutcher as Spencer, a secret agent, and Heigl as the unsuspecting spouse living a lovely middle-class life until, of course, Spencer's past revisits him and the action begins. Heigl's character is at first appalled by the guns and car chases, and then delighted. Unfortunately, *Killers* doesn't take the audience along for the ride.



She's Out of My League

Genre fodder of the rom-com persuasion that is less objectionable and derivative than *Killers*, but is certainly not about to rock anybody's weekend. The premise is simple: nice geeky guy with low self-esteem meets super gorgeous woman who doesn't care that he ain't cool. Alice Eve proves that for her, being beautiful is a cinch, and Jay Baruchel is perfectly adequate as an inadequate guy. Any bets on whether it will end happily ever after?



Please Please Me! (Fais-moi plaisir!)

By master comedian Emmanuël Mouret, who both directs and stars in this French bedroom comedy. The story has Mouret as Jean-Jacques, a man in a happy relationship with girlfriend Ariane (Frederique Bel), but confesses that he has lustful thoughts for another. In the manner of French films of this type, Ariane encourages her boyfriend to quench his desires by indulging them. This provides plenty of opportunity for clever physical comedy, and while *Please Please Me!* is likely to please some with its sexual innuendo, it is far from being Mouret's best work.



Letters for Father Jacob (Postia pappi Jaakobille)

Low-key Finnish film by director Klaus Haro that tells the simple story of Leila (Kaarina Hazard), a woman recently released from prison where she served a life sentence for murder. She finds work with a pastor who spends his days responding to letters from people in need. His compassion for others does nothing for her, until the letters stop and Father Jacob looks into the abyss. The story takes place against beautiful, if sometimes rather bleak, Finnish scenery. Fine cinematography and a solid script give this minor release, originally made for Finnish television, a life that lifts it above many more ambitious features.



Rabbit Without Ears 2 (Zweiohrkuken)

Following on from the success of *Keinohrhasen*, which enjoyed some popularity here as a cute little romantic/sex comedy for the European movie set, Til Schweiger's sequel seems to have tripped up. The movie finds most of its humor in the lavatory. There is a kindergarten element to assist with this, and contrived romantic jousting as a couple use their former boyfriend and girlfriend as weapons to fight their way out of their disintegrating relationship. The combination of gross-out situations and sexual innuendo may work for some.

