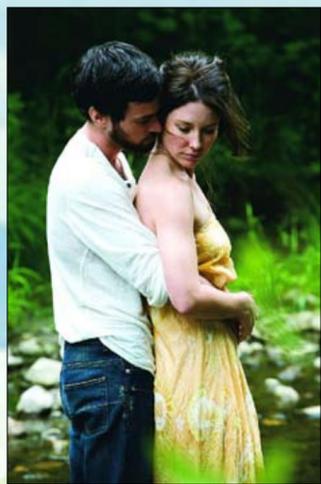


# Deadly serious

What would you do if  
you knew you were going to die?

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

## Film Notes

### AFTERWARDS

DIRECTED BY:  
GILLES BOURDOS

STARRING:  
ROMAIN DURIS (NATHAN),  
JOHN MALKOVICH (DOCTOR KAY),  
EVANGELINE LILLY (CLAIRE),  
PASCALE BUSSIERES (ANNA),  
SARA WAISGLASS (TRACEY),  
REECE THOMPSON (JEREMY)

RUNNING TIME:  
107 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:  
TODAY

As a contemplative exercise on the fragility of life and the need to cherish every moment of it, *Afterwards* has lots to offer.

Much of the credit for this must go to Alexandre Desplat, who composed the score, and to Taiwan-born cinematographer Mark Lee (李屏賓), who created the richly textured mood of *Afterwards* and helped save the film from the overwrought contrivances of director Gilles Bourdos, who seems to be aspiring to the same tortuous ambiguity that is the hallmark of auteur Atom Egoyan, whose most recent work, *Chloe*, is currently screening in Taipei, and the haunted metaphysical depths of Wim Wenders.

*Afterwards* tells the story of Nathan (Romain Duris), a high-flying lawyer whose cold detachment and cynical assessment of the world around him have brought him professional success but poisoned his relationship with his wife and daughter. He is visited by Doctor Kay (John Malkovich), who seems to tell him that he is about to die. Doctor Kay is "a messenger" (the film was also released under the title *The Messenger*), a person who is able to foresee the imminent death of those around him. His goal is to allow them to end their lives at peace with themselves and those around them.

Hesitant initially to listen, Nathan begins to heed Kay's advice and subsequently begins to depend on it as the doctor's cryptic directions gradually put him in touch with his family.

The most appealing aspect of *Afterwards* its unconventional approach to the central subject of death. Having announced that a character will die, it follows him through the mundane joys and frustrations that lead up to, but are often totally unconnected with, his demise. Death is all around us, even as we talk with friends, walk down the street or go to the bank.

Lee's luscious cinematography — Lee played a major part in Hou Hsiao-hsien's (侯孝賢) success and also contributed to the look of Wong Kar-wai's (王家衛) *In the Mood for Love* (花樣年華) — helps create a mood that is at once beautiful yet full of trepidation and sorrow.

The big city with its dangers and delights, the highways through wide-open spaces, the antiseptic motels by the interchange — all have beauty, even as they serve as a background to tragedy. Desplat's score plays well with these images, toying with our emotions in the way you might expect from the sound track of a thriller, building unease at the realization that all this beauty could, and indeed will, suddenly cease to be.

Kay and Nathan have tensions of their own, not least because the latter believes the former is threatening him with death (blame always attaches to the bearer of bad news), and while the metaphysical conundrum of what we would do if we knew we only had a certain amount of time to live is subtly explored, Nathan's character remains steadfastly one dimensional, preventing any real engagement with him as anything other than a symbolic representation of a materialistic everyman.

Devices such as the character of Jeremy, a patient in Kay's ward who has a heart condition that could cause his death at any moment and who rails against his fate until he finds comfort in visits from Jennifer, a girl who wrote to him after hearing of his story on TV, are a bit Oprah. Such heavy-handed treatment suggests that Bourdos is not fully confident with his material, adding a ponderous, hectoring quality that does the film no favors.

There are plenty of ideas knocking about inside *Afterwards*, but it has neither the loose lyricism of Wenders nor the intricate craftsmanship of Egoyan, and while striving to emulate both, it fails to be either.



## OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

### Inception

The big release for this week is not to be taken lightly, for director Christopher Nolan has come up with a film that is not only stupendous to look at, but also puts audiences through their paces with a heist movie that essentially takes place in the subconscious. *Memento*, made in 2000, had Nolan playing around with amnesia. *Inception* takes as its premise a technology that allows a person to enter the subconscious world of others. Having made mega bucks with *The Dark Knight* (2008), Nolan seems to have been given a license to play complex mind games once again, though this time on a much bigger budget. The risk has paid off, for in addition to highly regarded performances by Leonardo DiCaprio, who has well and truly shed his pretty-boy image, and Ellen Page, who has come a long way since *Juno*, the word on the street is that you'll want to walk right back into the theater after the credits roll to work out exactly what happened.



### I Killed My Mother (J'ai Tue Ma Mere)

This angst-ridden gay coming-of-age drama by first-time director Xavier Dolan has picked up a slew of awards (including three at Cannes) for a remarkable debut feature. The script, also by Dolan, has a raw power that wowed critics, though Dolan's visual style and his presence front of the camera in the leading role have received less uniform praise. The semi-autobiographical work focuses on the relationship between Hubert, a young man struggling with the realization of his sexuality, and an impatient and emotionally detached mother. The film wears its cinematic influences, which range from Jean-Luc Godard to Wong Kar-wai (王家衛), on its sleeve, but the moments of remarkable realism overcome the art-student posturing and make Dolan a young director worth watching.



### Elite Squad (Tropa de Elite)

More gritty art house filmmaking can be found in *Elite Squad*, a Brazilian film about slum clearance by death squad that picked up the Golden Bear at Berlin in 2008. A film influenced by *City of God*, *Elite Squad* trawls the grimy depths of Rio de Janeiro's slums and the dark world of the Special Police Operation Battalion (BOPE), a heavily armed, law-into-itself unit that is charged with tidying up the city in the run-up to a visit by the pope. The relationship between two idealistic young recruits and a jaded and cynical captain form the center of the narrative, and brutal violence between the drug cartels and the police serve as the shocking backdrop. With a script co-written by BOPE officer Rodrigo Pimentel, the film contains some interesting thoughts about violence breeding violence buried within its shameless exploitation format.



### Piecing Me Back Together (Mataaki)

Based on a best-selling novel by romance author Ren Kawahara, *Piecing Me Back Together* tells a story of young love interrupted by the terrible consequences of a traffic accident. Izumi and Junichi look forward to a happy life together. Izumi is killed and although Junichi survives, she discovers that she has lost all memory of the event. Lawyer Makiko comes along and decides that she will help rebuild that memory and launches an investigation into the accident. The film features established names in the leading roles, and for those in search of a good weepy melodrama, *Piecing Me Back Together* will probably fit the bill.



## FILM

# Beyond his wildest dreams

After his *Batman* outings, Christopher Nolan returns to head trip territory with *Inception*

BY DAVE ITZKOFF

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, LOS ANGELES

Nearly everything in Christopher Nolan's world is more than it appears to be. In his hands his 2000 feature *Memento* became not only a taut thriller with a catchy psychological gimmick but also a calling card to a career of cinematic independence.

His most recent film, *The Dark Knight*, was not just a big-budget summer movie about a vigilante in a bat costume, but also a meditation on heroism and terrorism. Even the deceptively quaint home he keeps on an unassuming block in Hollywood has a dual identity: It doubles as his residence and the bunker where he has been finishing his first film since *The Dark Knight*, which in 2008 earned the all-time highest US domestic gross for a motion picture not made by James Cameron.

Yet for all the fanfare that will accompany Nolan's new film, *Inception*, when Warner Brothers releases it today, most of its intended viewers will know almost nothing about it. At Nolan's preference, trailers for

*Inception* have shown little more than snippets of its star, Leonardo DiCaprio, and a nattily attired supporting cast in slow-motion action sequences. Intensifying the fantastical quality of these disconnected moments and their vaguely modern settings is the revelation that they are taking place inside a dream.

With these few bread crumbs Nolan and his studio are confident that their opaque and costly film will lure large crowds. They are betting that moviegoers have come to regard Nolan as a director who combines intimate emotions with outside imagination and seemingly limitless resources — a blockbuster auteur who has made bigness his medium.

"When somebody's spent years making a film and spent massive amounts of money — crazy amounts of money, really, that get spent on these huge films — then you want to see something extremely ambitious in every sense," Nolan, 39, said a few weeks ago, sitting outside the garage that is now his editing suite.

"Of course," he added with a dry chuckle, "there are all kinds

of extremely ambitious failures as well."

In *Inception* DiCaprio plays Cobb, the leader of a group of "extractors": people who are able to participate in and shape the dreams of others. With these skills, extractors can teach clients how to safeguard secrets locked away in their subconscious, or how to steal them from unfortified minds. Presented with the inverse challenge of implanting an idea in someone's head, Cobb assembles his team (including Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Ellen Page) and designs an intricate mind heist that leads them through layers of dreams within dreams, and to a mysterious woman (Marion Cotillard) from Cobb's past.

Creating the film's multiple valences of reality took seven months of principal photography in six cities — Tokyo; Carlington, England; Paris; Tangier, Morocco; Los Angeles; and Calgary, Alberta, at an estimated cost of US\$160 million.

For Nolan, those statistics are humbling but necessary. "What I found is, it's not possible to execute this concept in a small

fashion," he said.

"As soon as you're talking about dreams," he added, "the potential of the human mind is infinite. It has to feel like you could go absolutely anywhere by the end of the film. And it has to work on a massive scale."

With *Memento*, his independent film noir about a man (Guy Pearce) seeking an assailant who has robbed him of his short-term memory, Nolan capably demonstrated he could make compelling movies at smaller scales.

But the experience of its release taught him a lesson about overnight success in Hollywood. Despite critical acclaim, *Memento* was passed over by several American studios and, in an unusual move, was distributed domestically by the company that financed it.

"It was like riding a bike into a sand pit at full speed," said Jonathan Nolan, the director's brother, who wrote the short story from which *Memento* was adapted. "We thought we've got this place figured out completely, and then we had to rebuild."

Having yearned from an early

age to make big, sweeping films in the mode of directors like Ridley Scott and Michael Mann, Christopher Nolan became more committed to his elusive goal and cognizant of how rare these opportunities would be.

"He's always wanted to make these things really, really well," Jonathan Nolan said of his brother. "Now the level of the audience's scrutiny has roughly reached parity with his own scrutiny of what he's doing."

Those expectations have been inflated by Christopher Nolan's intricately woven thrillers *Insomnia* and *The Prestige*, but mostly by the runaway success of his superhero films *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*, which earned more than US\$1 billion worldwide and a posthumous Academy Award for its co-star Heath Ledger. Figuring out how to follow that film, Nolan said, "could be paralyzing if you chose to take credit for the success rather than understanding that when you catch the zeitgeist in that way, that's a very unique thing." And, he added, "not possible to explain."

Instead, after a monthlong

vacation in Florida, he returned to the *Inception* screenplay he began almost a decade ago.

Though dreams have always been a staple of cinema, Nolan said that movies too often treat them like "a little TV program that we watch when we're asleep."

The crucial breakthrough to completing his *Inception* script was considering what could happen if multiple people could share the same dream. "Once you remove the privacy," Nolan said, "you've created an infinite number of alternative universes in which people can meaningfully interact, with validity, with weight, with dramatic consequences."

Warner Brothers, which has released all of Nolan's films since *Insomnia* in 2002, had little hesitation committing to the enormous production he envisioned, knowing those details — and his involvement — would attract audiences.

"It's being sold on the scale of the movie, the idea of the movie, the cast, the visuals," said Jeff Robinov, president of the studio's motion-picture group. "But Chris brings a lot to the party. There's a

big expectation around what his next movie's going to be."

For the *Inception* cast, the intricate screenplay Nolan wrote was tantalizing but occasionally perplexing. "It was a very well written, comprehensive script," DiCaprio said, "but you really had to have Chris in person, to try to articulate some of the things that have been swirling around his head for the last eight years."

In discussing *Inception*, Nolan occasionally became bogged down in long asides as he explained the intricate rules he devised for its dream world. ("I promise you, it's not confusing in the film," he said after unpacking one particularly Byzantine detail.) But he made no apologies for its ambiguous promotional campaign.

"It's really, at its core, a big action heist movie, and it's a movie that doesn't try to bamboozle the audience continuously," he said. Given the complexity of its universe, "it's a lot harder to just put out a two-and-a-half-minute trailer, and everyone goes, 'Oh, yeah, I know what that is.'"