

Matters of life and death



Nonprofessional actors add a dose of realism to contrast the comic action in *Seven Days in Heaven*. PHOTOS COURTESY OF SWALLOW WINGS FILMS



Film Notes

SEVEN DAYS IN HEAVEN 父後七日

DIRECTED BY:
WANG YU-LIN (王育麟)
AND ESSAY LIU (劉梓濤)

STARRING:
WANG LI-WEN (王莉雯) AS MEI,
CHEN CHIA-HSIANG (陳家祥)
AS DA-ZHI,
CHANG CHIA-NIEN (張嘉年)
AS THE FATHER,
WU PENG-FON (吳朋奉) AS YI

RUNNING TIME:
92 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
IN MANDARIN AND HOKLO
(COMMONLY KNOWN AS TAIWANESE)
WITH CHINESE AND
ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

Having won two awards at this year's Taipei Film Festival, the feature debut co-directed by Wang Yu-lin and Essay Liu is set to win the hearts of local audiences with its amusing tale of funeral rites

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER



Adapted from Essay Liu's (劉梓濤) story of the same title, which won the Lin Rung San Literary Award (林榮三文學獎) in 2006, this feature debut, co-directed by Liu and veteran film and television director Wang Yu-lin (王育麟), takes the traditional Taiwanese mourning ritual as its focal point.

Seven Days in Heaven (父後七日), an entertainingly absurd comedy and affecting drama about death and how we cope with

it, opens with Mei, played by movie producer and scriptwriter Wang Li-wen (王莉雯), returning to her hometown in Changhua (彰化) after her father (veteran actor Chang Chia-nien (張嘉年), known as Tai Pao (太保)), passes away.

A Taoist seven-day mourning ritual is held, but despite their loss, Mei and her brother Da-zhi (theater actor and director Chen Chia-hsiang (陳家祥)) have little time to grieve as their days are filled with elaborate formalities involving a professional weeper, a scripture-chanting crew, mourning clothes, straw sandals and much more.

Luckily a distant relative, Taoist priest Yi, played by theater professional Wu Peng-fon (吳朋奉), is on hand to ensure that etiquette is followed.

Meanwhile, the deceased's life is gradually revealed through Mei's flashbacks of seemingly insignificant yet meaningful moments shared between daughter and father. Soon, the ritual is over, and Mei returns to her life in Taipei.

The film ends with a coda that finds Mei, several months later, at Hong Kong airport waiting for her flight to take off. Suddenly, she is seized with grief, crushed by the thought that there is no need to buy duty-free cigarettes for her father as she always did when returning home from trips abroad.

Seven Days in Heaven gains much of its charm from exposing the elaborateness of traditional Taiwanese funereal customs with low-key humor.

A nameless character in Liu's original work, the Taoist priest acts as a guide who helps the brother and sister, as well as the audience, navigate the meticulous set of rules that govern everything from when to show and not to show grief, to the items the deceased needs for the afterworld.

The result is a series of genuinely humorous moments that sees the daughter using toothpaste foam on her mouth to mimic crying and the son placing pornographic books, which are, apparently, in great demand in the next life, in the coffin.

To the directing duo's credit, they neatly convey a sense of absurdity and construct a slightly surreal atmosphere, accentuated by the creative use of colors and music, such as in the opening scene when the priest prepares for the ritual in a room outlandishly toned red and orange with *Hava Nagila* ("Let Us Rejoice"), a Hebrew folk song performed at Jewish weddings, playing in the background.

Liu and Wang show considerable talent in revealing the daughter's inner emotions through the polished story, which swings smoothly between humor and serious insight.

In one well-executed sequence, which begins with a comic scene involving the digital manipulation of a photograph of the father to be used at the funeral, a flashback shows Dad teaching Mei how to ride a motorcycle on her 18th birthday and ends with a scene in which the daughter carries the dead father's photograph on the back of her bike.

Interestingly, the filmmakers chose to use nonprofessional actors, mostly Liu's neighbors, relatives and friends from the writer's hometown in Changhua, which imbues the production with a sense of realism and authenticity and heightens the impression that the story is about real people experiencing the absurdities of everyday life.

Seven Days in Heaven is an eloquent example of how movies that are firmly rooted in Taiwanese culture can pluck heartstrings that Hollywood films can't.



OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Rock On! (賣囍大明星)

Sentimentality, catchy tunes and local color come together in this Taiwanese musical coming-of-age flick starring young wannabe actors and a has-been entertainer down on his luck. Directed by Hong Kong's Lawrence Ah Mon (劉國昌) and featuring aging celebrity Franky Gao (高凌風), as well as a gaggle of TV soap opera idols such as Shao Hsin (邵昕) and Hsiang Yu-jie (向語潔), the production's message is that hope is all you need to achieve your dreams.



Ocean Heaven (海洋天堂)

Serious, sincere and sentimental, this Jet Li (李連杰) nonaction debut does great credit to the star's acting abilities, but is too earnest for its own good. Li plays a terminally ill single parent of an autistic son, but if you can stand the mawkish premise, then in other respects the film is well made.

The portrayal of Li's character, who discovers he has liver cancer, and the exploration of the huge difficulties faced by those who fall through the gaps of society's welfare system, is thoughtful and affecting. The film boasts a distinguished production crew, which includes cinematographer Christopher Doyle and Japanese composer Joe Hisaishi (*Howl's Moving Castle* and *Ponyo*).



Penguins in the Sky — Asahiyama Zoo

A fictional film set against the background of the once troubled Asahiyama Zoo in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost zoo. In *Penguins in the Sky*, the zoo faces financial problems born of its isolated location and competition from more commercially savvy theme parks. Enter Yoshida (Yasuhiko Nakamura), a young zookeeper who is dedicated to saving the zoo from closure. New forms of interactive exhibits are developed, which led to a massive increase in visitor numbers. The film features many of the zoo's actual attractions, including the Polar Bear Aquatic Park and the "Walk-Through" Penguin Aquarium. The film is based on a novel by Masao Kosuge, a chief manager at the zoo who was instrumental in pushing through many of these new developments. On the brink of closure in the early 1990s, Asahiyama Zoo is now one of the country's most visited zoos.



The Switch

Yet another zany romantic comedy starring Jennifer Aniston, *The Switch* is likely to polarize audiences between those easily able to suspend disbelief and those who find the premise utterly ridiculous and unworthy. The latter are likely to be the losers, as Aniston and Jason Bateman, who serves as narrator and male lead, put in strong performances, and the child star of the film, Thomas Robinson, elevates the clichéd role of precocious kid caught in the middle of adult relationship muddles to something worth watching. The movie is based on a short story by Pulitzer-winning writer Jeffrey Eugenides (*The Virgin Suicides*), but the rom-com treatment has ensured that the original is all but unrecognizable.



The Last Exorcism

A low-budget horror film that goes the handheld route in the manner of *The Blair Witch Project*. This device, apart from being annoying, has been overused in the past few years. The story is that of an itinerant preacher in the American south who has an attack of conscience and decides to give a documentary team an inside look at his exorcisms. Suffice to say, both he and the team end up getting much more than they bargained for. Some solid acting by relative unknowns, good use of atmosphere and a "shock" ending that has been almost universally derided as an absolute stinker.



Piranha 3D

Summer break. Babes in bikinis. Toned dudes. Babes taking off bikinis. And babes having their limbs torn off by ravenous fish and drowning in an ocean of blood. In the interests of gender balance, there is also a penis being torn off and devoured by said ravenous fish. In *Piranha 3D*, we have state-of-the-art 3D technology used to revisit the hokey effects of 1970 horror-comedy; it is a film that dives right in at the trashy end of the B-movie spectrum, and has a thoroughly good time with its vastly over-qualified cast, which includes Elisabeth Shue, Adam Scott and Ving Rhames, as well as a cameo from Richard Dreyfuss. Laugh as you bart.



Lourdes

Blurring the line between fiction and documentary, *Lourdes* is a film firstly about the famous Catholic pilgrimage site in the Pyrenees mountains, and secondly about a woman who visits it with a half-hope that the magic of the place will bring her some relief from the multiple sclerosis that confines her to a wheelchair. Directed by Jessica Hausner, the film moves forward at a leisurely pace, letting Lourdes and its characters, including the shysters hawking cheap salvation found there, and a real concern for Christian ministry and the working of faith, tell their own stories. Hausner avoids any easy explanations, and though the film is too fair-minded to be dramatic, it has many other compensations in its thoughtful approach to religion.



Avatar: Special Edition

As if *Avatar*, which ran 162 minutes, wasn't exhausting enough, it is now back with eight extra minutes that had originally been relegated to the editing room floor. The story remains unchanged and the additions provide no new insight, nor spectacle. Strictly for fans who want to spend a few more precious moments in James Cameron's finely crafted if slightly gaudy alternate reality.



Crayon Shin-chan: Super-Dimension! The Storm Called My Bride

A massively popular children's manga character who began life in 1990 in a serial appearing in a Japanese weekly magazine. Crayon Shin-chan, with his inability to understand what the adults around him actually want, is constantly getting into scrapes that have been brought to life in comic, television, book and cinematic form over the past two decades. Starting out from a simple domestic setting when first conceived, this latest offering has Crayon Shin-chin engaged in time travel and other exotic activities. For fans and small children.

