

FILM REVIEW



'Sunshine Cleaning' has all the right ingredients for an offbeat indie comedy, but somehow the parts don't add up

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF FLASH FORWARD ENTERTAINMENT



Sunshine Cleaning, a quirky indie picture starring Amy Adams, originally released in 2008, has finally made it to Taiwan for a mainstream release, possibly with the idea of picking up on some of the massive publicity which surrounded the release of *Julie & Julia* (2009) earlier this year, which brought Adams to prominence with local audiences. It also reveals to us that Adams is a more sophisticated actress than her role as Julie Powell gave her the opportunity to show.

This is an old-fashioned film in that it relies heavily on a fine script and interesting characters to drive the story forward, but it also has a gloss of indie chic about it, which links it up with recent hits such as *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Juno*. For better or for worse, it doesn't have the same edginess as either of these films, and its indie appeal is something of a pose.

Sunshine Cleaning opens with a man walking into a gun shop with a 20 gauge shotgun cartridge in his pocket. He asks to inspect some guns, then uses one to blow his head off. The resultant mess is clearly a tragedy for someone, but it also represents a business opportunity for those specializing in the cleanup operation.

The rest of the film follows this formula of tragedy leading to opportunity, and we know that despite all the obstacles that the main character faces in getting her life together, she will inevitably succeed. This makes the tragedy of life just a little too facile for the film's own good, and fatally undermines its attempts to achieve real indie street cred.

Rose Lorkowski (Amy Adams) is a former high school cheerleader now eking out a somewhat precarious

life as a maid. She is having an affair with police officer Mac (Steve Zahn), who she knows deep in her heart will never leave his wife Heather, a former schoolmate. As Rose is in desperate need money to pay her son's tuition, Mac helps her connect with the crime scene cleanup business, and *Sunshine Cleaning* is born. Rose is insecure, having failed to provide herself with a husband, or become part of an acceptable profession that will put her on the same social footing as her high school friends. Her ambition is to be a real estate agent. Her efforts to achieve a solid, tiresome middle-class respectability are hampered by her slacker sister Norah (Emily Blunt) and father (Alan Arkin), a small-time scam artist.

The messy business of crime scene cleanup serves as a remarkably good springboard for Megan Holley's script, which opts for a thoughtful humor rather than picking up easy gross out jokes. The main complaint about *Sunshine Cleaning* is that it takes on too much, and a subplot that involves Norah tracking down the daughter of a deceased woman whose house she helps Rose clean out is left hanging mid-movie. It is a sign of the film's quality that even this loose end vibrates with dramatic potential before it is unceremoniously dropped. For the rest, it sometimes seems that Holley is trying to incorporate every possible device and character type ever used in light comedy into this film. There are some excellent moments, and just when you hope the director will pursue a particular line, it is dropped and another device is introduced.

One of the highlights of *Sunshine Cleaning* is the performance of Alan

Arkin as Joe Lorkowski, a character who has the wisdom of the deeply flawed personality. Although the role is not quite up to the same levels of weirdness that he displayed as Grandpa Edwin Hoover in *Little Miss Sunshine*, it is still full of a skewed vitality, and hints at depths that the efficient and sometimes all too slick performances of Adams and Blunt fail to provide.

Sunshine Cleaning is a deeply enjoyable film to watch, though it promises more than it actually delivers. It has good intentions, but the film is too programmatic, the careful nuts and bolts of its structure all proudly on display. Any organic unity, and the satisfying feeling that goes along with that, are lost in this display of technical prowess.

Film Notes

SUNSHINE CLEANING

DIRECTED BY:
CHRISTINE JEFFS

STARRING:
AMY ADAMS (ROSE LORKOWSKI),
EMILY BLUNT (NORAH LORKOWSKI), ALAN ARKIN (JOE LORKOWSKI), JASON SPEVACK (OSCAR LORKOWSKI), STEVE ZAHN (MAC), MARY LYNN RAJSKUB (LYNN), CLIFTON COLLINS JR (WINSTON), AMY REDFORD (HEATHER)

RUNNING TIME:
91 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

Life is messy

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW AND HO YI



Ajami

A nominee for the 2010 Oscar in the Best Foreign Film category, *Ajami* has taken a long time to be given a local release. It is a Middle Eastern take on Paul Haggis' *Crash*, but without the absurd coincidences and heavy-handed sentimentality. Directed by first-time feature filmmakers Yaron Shani and Scandar Copti, one an Israeli Jew and the other a Palestinian, the film presents a multi-stranded story about life in the mixed Arab and Jewish neighborhood from which the film takes its name. Evenhanded and thoughtful, the vision it presents is bleak, with misunderstanding and violence tearing apart the lives of normal people who aspire to little more than survival. At 120 minutes, *Ajami* is a little long, and the jittery handheld camerawork can become annoying, but these are minor complaints against an outstanding film that works at both topical and dramatic levels.

Donkey Xote

It is hard to imagine why this 2007 Spanish animation, now dubbed into English, has ended up on these shores, other than as fodder for those who thought that *Shrek Forever After* was funny. Even the trailer for the film announces that this film is "from the producers who saw *Shrek*," a joking reference to its stylistic plagiarism of that successful franchise. There is even a donkey whose resemblance to *Shrek's* best friend seems rather more than coincidental. Based on the story of Don Quixote, its riffs on the complex novel are not without wit, but in trying to bridge the gulf between literary humor and DreamWorks antics, it ties itself in knots and forfeits most of its potential appeal.



Resident Evil: Afterlife

The bad news: There is life after death. After we thought that the *Resident Evil* franchise had come to an end, it has returned, and in 3D and 3D IMAX no less. The additional technology will come in handy for a series that has always touted its effects, and the trailers certainly sport great visual prowess. Star Milla Jovovich (Alice) never fails to look less than ravishing in a skin-tight bodysuit and she is joined once again by Ali Larter (Niki Sanders from *Heroses*) in this girl-power

action feature. The world has been ravaged by an infectious virus, and it is up to Alice to take down the people responsible. Guns, knives and explosive devices abound as Alice fights her way through a vast underground complex to complete her mission.



The Stool Pigeon (線人)

Dante Lam (林超賢) is back in yet another hard-hitting cops-and-robbers flick with a slightly different twist. This time the heart of the story is the police informant, a much-overlooked character in the movie detective's arsenal. Elements from recent films *Fire of Conscience* (火龍), *Sniper* (神槍手) and *Beast Stalker* (証人) all make an appearance, and the mise-en-scene might all be a bit ho-hum if you are looking for originality, but for Lam's growing number of fans, this is unlikely to be much of a worry, since you can't get too much of a good thing. The story, which centers on a relationship between a detective, played by Nick Cheung (張家輝), and his informant, played by Nicolas Tse (謝霆鋒), has sufficient complexity to draw audiences into the story, and Kwai Lun-mei (桂綸

鎧) provides more than adequate eye candy.



Saying Good-bye, Oneday (Sayonara itsuka)

Japanese film made by South Korean director John Lee that primarily takes place in Thailand. The complexity pretty much ends there, for *Saying Good-bye, Oneday* is really a fairly straightforward piece of romantic melodrama about a man, Higashigaito Yutaka, who chooses professional success over love, only to find that his high-powered job is no substitute. It goes without saying that Yutaka has the opportunity to reprise his youthful passion. He meets her 25 years later in a Bangkok hotel; both discover that the fires of love have not been extinguished. The plot is full of holes, but *Saying Good-bye, Oneday* is stylishly put together and contains superior acting by J-pop idol Miho Nakayama and veteran TV actress Yuriko Ishida.



Bangkok Traffic (Love) Story

An urban love story that broke box office records when it was released in Thailand, the film was

rather surprisingly made with the sponsorship of Bangkok's BTS Skytrain system. With the city playing a significant role, *Bangkok Traffic (Love) Story* lends itself to comparison with Arvin Chen's (陳駿霖) *Au Revoir Taipei* (一頁台北). While this is basically a fluffy romantic drama about young people overcoming the many obstacles that modern city life places in the way of establishing a strong and meaningful relationship, the acting and storytelling are solid and the crucial role of nighttime maintenance workers on the Skytrain system fits snugly into the overall texture of the film.



Flowers

A film by veteran Japanese director Norihiro Koizumi, *Flowers* is a celebration of beautiful Japanese women through the ages and has a closer relationship to glamour calendars and sophisticated advertising than it does to drama. It stars some of the most celebrated beauties of Japan's cinema establishment, including Yu Aoi, Yuko Takeuchi, Rena Tanaka, Yukie Nakama, Kyoka Suzuki and Ryoko Hirose, and the story ranges from pre-war Japan to the present. Its conceptual framework is largely that of matinee soap opera, with many of the problems faced by the women in the film solved by marriage to Mr Right.



Superior Ultraman 8 Brothers

Ultraman is a venerable Japanese fantasy anime that got started way back in 1979, the stories revolving around an array of superhero characters who battle monsters and other evil forces. The hokey effects have now acquired a retro chic, and the massive merchandising machine continues to surround these simple toy-like figures. In this most recent incarnation, Ultraman Mebius slips through into an alternate universe that is under threat and is spurred by a mysterious "red-shoed girl" to awaken seven other heroes to save it.



Anita

Rescheduled from last week, *Anita* is an Argentine film about

a young woman with Down syndrome who lives with her mother running a small shop in Buenos Aires. The relationship is carefully crafted by director Marcos Carnevale, and features excellent acting by veteran Norma Aleandro as the mother and Alejandra Manzo as the title character. In allowing Anita, for all her disability, to be a real character with both good and bad elements, the film has more to offer than a short synopsis might suggest.



Two Cities Film Festival (兩個城市影展)

The Two Cities Film Festival (兩個城市影展) comprises six films by veteran documentary director Dong Cheng-liang (董振良), who is noted for exploring social problems in Kinmen (金門), his hometown. The lineup includes Dong's newest work *Movie Eater* (吃電影的人), which fuses the director's ideals and dreams with his memories of Kinmen and Taipei. The festival runs through Oct. 17 at alternative venues across Taipei. The screenings schedule for tomorrow and Sunday is 4:30pm, 7:30pm and 8:30pm at Whose Books (胡恩二手書店), 44, Ln 235 Zhongzheng Rd, Taipei City (台北市中正路235巷44號). For more information, send an e-mail to firefly.film@msa.hinet.net or call (02) 8914-5953.