

FILM REVIEW

Sometimes words just arrive on our lips without much thought and end up cutting a bloody swath through those we love most. The power of words to hurt is at the very core of Noah Baumbach's latest venture. This is not a new subject for the writer/director, who has dealt with the metaphorical bloodletting of human relationships, especially within families, in previous films *The Squid and the Whale* (2005) and *Margot at the Wedding* (2007), both of which managed to be interesting, but were too self-involved to be engaging. *Greenberg*, with a transformed Ben Stiller in the title role, may well be Baumbach's best film yet, and is certainly a worthy alternative to the higher profile *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, which is also being released this week.

Stiller's performance is a million miles from the comedy antics of the *Night at the Museum* franchise. In *Greenberg* he is a gaunt, stripped-down version of a comedian put out on a limb without any gags or one-liners. In fact, he manages to say the wrong thing at the wrong time on virtually every occasion, and while far from being sympathetic, remains a person in whom we can all see a little bit of ourselves. We are not Roger Greenberg, and we could never want to be Roger Greenberg,

Ben Stiller shows that he's much more than a one-trick pony as a man recovering from a nervous breakdown in 'Greenberg'

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

but there is a little bit of Roger Greenberg in all of us, and this gives the title character and the movie its appeal and its strength. The Greenberg of the title is a man who has recently recovered from a mental breakdown and has relocated from New York to Los Angeles to do a little house and dog sitting for his brother, who is on vacation with the family. The brother, Philip Greenberg (Chris Messina), provides his personal assistant to help. The PA is Florence Marr, brilliantly realized by Greta Gerwig in a portrayal that is critical to the film's success. While Stiller provides a showcase of what a skilled comic can do when deprived of all his props, Gerwig is an object lesson in what you can do with nothing more than a change of expression and a tone of voice. Her performance



Ben Stiller, right, Greta Gerwig, left and Rhys Ifans star in *Greenberg*, directed by Noah Baumbach.

is so natural that it is easy to miss the subtlety, and this simplicity serves as the perfect foil to Stiller's more highly orchestrated performance. There are moments when *Greenberg* achieves an elusive combination of perceptiveness and wit that bring it to the same level as such classics as Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977). Stiller's lead character has a more abrasive quality that may simply be the result of the harsher age in which *Greenberg* was made. Indeed, Allen's recently released *Whatever Works* (2009) features a lead character (Boris, played by Larry David) of similarly abrasive temperament, and aims at similarly unsettling insights into the spiritual abyss of modern man. Gerwig is the perfect foil to

Stiller's wound-up performance, for while Greenberg is going nowhere with great determination — "I'm just doing nothing for a while" he says more than once in the film — Marr is uncertain where she might be going, but embarks on the journey with a sweetness and acceptance that verges on passivity. Greenberg's anger at everything, his insistence on having an opinion and airing it to a largely indifferent world, is what appeals to her, but it is also what makes their relationship so rocky. This is where Baumbach's skill with dialogue appears at the fore, in scenes of almost unspeakable psychological cruelty. The wounds heal, but the scars remain, itching and picked over as the characters reengage, unable to pull free

from the centripetal forces created by their relationship. Among the supporting cast, Rhys Ifans puts in one of his best performances ever as a former bandmate of Greenberg's. He remains friends despite the fact that it was Greenberg who, in his usual demanding and hectoring way, managed to destroy the band's hope of signing with a major label. The backstory about the band is sketched out deftly in a couple of short dialogues, and Baumbach is then able to weave it into the whole fabric of the story, so that it is an invisible presence constantly unsettling even the simplest conversations. This talent to make a little bit of story go a long way is part of the essential strength of Baumbach's writing, and this, among his other technical skills, goes a long way in compensating for his sometimes preening intellectual self-regard. Although *Greenberg* is shot through with an existential angst, it is also a remarkably beautiful film with characters who are sympathetic if not always appealing. Despite all their flaws, we want to know more about these people, even as they unwittingly damage each other through their words and actions. It brings to mind a line from the opening of *Annie Hall*: "[Life] is full of loneliness, misery, suffering, and unhappiness, and its all over much too quickly."

It's not easy being Greenberg

Film Notes

GREENBERG

DIRECTED BY:
NOAH BAUMBACH

STARRING:

BEN STILLER (ROGER GREENBERG), GRETA GERWIG (FLORENCE MARR), RHYS IFANS (IVAN SCHRANK), JENNIFER JASON LEIGH (BETH), BRIE LARSON (SARA), JUNO TEMPLE (MURIEL) AND CHRIS MESSINA (PHILLIP GREENBERG)

RUNNING TIME:
107 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY



FILM REVIEW

Play it again, Andrei

BY STEPHEN HOLDEN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

A messy, comedic sprawl that leaks at the seams, the Romanian director Radu Mihaileanu's *Concerto* aspires to be something like a French-Russian answer to *The Producers*. Lunging wildly between satirical farce and teary sentimentality, the movie follows the misadventures of a ragtag symphony orchestra that travels from Moscow to Paris under false pretenses.

Hoary stereotypes abound. Drunken Russians, thieving Gypsies, crooked oligarchs and zealous former Communist apparatchiks: All are caricatured in a story whose multiple subplots tumble over one another in a chaotic pileup.

The protagonist of *The Concert*, Andrei Filipov (Alexei Guskov), is a former musical wunderkind and conductor of the Bolshoi Orchestra who fell from grace 30 years ago in an anti-Semitic purge near the end of the Brezhnev era. After flouting authority by hiring Jewish musicians, Andrei was rudely ousted midconcert during a performance of Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto*, a romantic war horse that the movie milks for its last ounce of schmaltz and then some. Reduced to toiling as a janitor



Alexei Guskov and Melanie Laurent star in *The Concert*, directed by Radu Mihaileanu.

in the concert hall in which he was fired, the miserable Andrei still dreams of restoration. His enterprising wife earns money by hiring "extras" to attend underpopulated political rallies and parties. Andrei seizes his chance for redemption when he intercepts a fax from the Theatre du Chatelet in Paris, inviting the Bolshoi Orchestra to substitute at the last minute for the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Instead of putting the invitation into the proper hands, he and his best friend, Sacha Grossman (Dmitry Nazarov), a bearish cellist,

secretly recruit the remnants of the old orchestra, many of whom have given up classical music. One supplies the sound effects for pornographic films, another drives a cab, and others are found fiddling in a Gypsy camp. During negotiations with the persnickety Parisian impresario Olivier Duplessis (Francois Berleand), Andrei grandly insists that the musicians dine at a chic restaurant that has changed hands and turns out to be a belly-dancing emporium. Most important, he insists the featured piece be the Tchaikovsky *Violin*

Concerto. For reasons that are not fully explained until the end of the movie in crudely inserted flashbacks, the soloist must be a beautiful and celebrated young violinist, Anne-Marie Jacquet (Melanie Laurent), who has never played the piece before. Laurent (*Inglourious Basterds*) is a radiant screen presence among an otherwise ramshackle assemblage, and the movie bets all its chips on her performance to deliver a shamelessly tear-jerking payoff. Unless you buy *The Concert's* nonsensical premise — the film was written by Mihaileanu, Alan-Michel Blanc and Matthew Robbins — appreciation of this satirical fairy tale is next to impossible. The movie never satisfactorily explains how the musicians acquire their instruments, travel visas and concert attire in only two weeks. In one bit this raucous, ragtag orchestra lines up in a Moscow airport to receive fake passports without anyone blinking an eye. Once in Paris they storm the city like a barbarian horde, demanding their money, getting drunk and scattering hither and yon. *The Concert* doesn't even pretend to understand the workings of the classical music world. The night of the event the

members of the motley ensemble straggle into the theater (some of them late) to take their seats and play without having had a single rehearsal. The harder this desperately obsequious circus of a movie tries to entertain, the more it falls short.

Film Notes

THE CONCERT

DIRECTED BY:
RADU MIHAILEANU

STARRING:
ALEXEI GUSKOV (ANDREI FILIPOV), DMITRY NAZAROV (SACHA GROSSMAN), MELANIE LAURENT (ANNE-MARIE JACQUET), FRANCOIS BERLEAND (OLIVIER DUPLESSIS), MIOU MIOU (GUYLENE DE LA RIVIERE) AND VALIERI BARINOV (IVAN GAVRILOV)

LANGUAGES:
IN FRENCH AND RUSSIAN WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

RUNNING TIME:
107 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

2010 Neo-Cult Classics Film Festival (2010新·地下經典影展)



Following its recent HorrorFever mini film festival, distributor Catchplay has put together another batch of non-mainstream horror features ranging from straight-to-DVD boobs-and-bullets B movies like *Bitch Slap* to campy romps like *Yatterman*, which took top slot in the Japanese box office for four weeks when released last year. The 12 movies mostly fall into a broadly defined horror/gore category (the two already mentioned are something of an exception), and include fantasy (*Vampire Girl V.S. Frankenstein Girl*, Japan), zombies (*Dead Snow*, Norway, *The Neighbor Zombie*, South Korea), slasher (*Tokyo Gore Police*, Japan) and classic grind house (*Trailer Park of Terror*, US), and various combinations and variations of the aforementioned. Screenings run through Oct. 8 at the Shin Kong Cineplex (台北新光影城), 36 Xining S Rd, Taipei City (台北市西寧南路36號). Detailed information about the films can be found at www.catchplay.com. Single tickets cost NT\$175 when purchased through 7-Eleven store ibon kiosks or NT\$190 directly from the venue. Detailed information on screening times and ticket discounts can be found at www.catchplay.com/tw/neoecult.

The Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen (陳真:精武風雲)



Billed as the sequel to Bruce Lee's 1972 classic *Fist of Fury* (精武門), and directed by *Infernal Affairs'* Lau Wai-keung (劉偉強), *The Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen* has much to tantalize martial arts fans. Primarily there is Donnie Yen (甄子丹), fresh from his stint as another patriotic martial arts hero in two *Ip Man* movies. He plays the title character, Chen Zhen (陳真), a role that cements his place as the foremost contemporary Chinese martial arts performer. Unfortunately, the production team didn't place its faith in his chop-socky talents and chose to overload the story with complex subplots, most of which lack conviction. Shu Qi (舒淇) is included on the bill to show a bit of leg, and though there are a couple of masterful fight sequences, the film's pretensions to be more than just a fight movie fail to be realized.

Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps



Oliver Stone's much anticipated sequel to the original *Wall Street*, released 23 years ago. Stone has said that he felt that in unintentionally setting up Gordon Gekko as a role model for a generation of MBAs he delivered the wrong message, and *Money Never Sleeps* is an attempt to rebuild Gekko from the ground up. Gekko, played again by Michael Douglas, is out of prison, but is he really a new man? Shia LaBeouf (from the *Transformers* series) is a young protege who looks up to the former financial whizz, but also has ambitions to net Gekko's estranged and idealistic daughter (played by Carey Mulligan).

A Very Very Beautiful Love Story (Ensemble, Nous Allons Vivre Une Tres, Tres Grande Histoire d'Amour ...)



French film that has achieved some appeal among those with a taste for vaguely surrealist romance fantasies. The story follows a convoluted and highly improbable love affair between Dorothee (Marina Hands) and Nicolas (Julien Dore) and endures many separations and even a marriage between the heroine and a deaf-mute Italian tailor played by Guillaume Gallienne (see review of *The Concert*). The film favors style and sentiment over plot, and the whole concoction is *tres, tres* whimsical and Gallic, and perfectly delicious if you like this sort of thing.

Man of Vendetta



South Korean drama about a preacher, Joo Young-soo, who suffers a crisis of faith when his five-year-old daughter is kidnapped. Eight years later, long after he has abandoned religion, Joo is approached by the kidnapper, who demands a ransom. Religion and a lust for vengeance all play a part in this drama, with the religious aspect marking it out as something different from the conventional thriller. There is lots of violence as Joo declines to turn the other cheek. Starring Kim Myeong Min, an A-lister in South Korea with a solid regional following through his performance in *The White Tower* (白色巨塔), a hugely popular television soap.

The Sea Purple (Viola di Mare)



A costume drama about young women falling in love in 19th-century Sicily. The problem is that Angela (Valeria Solarino) and Sara (Isabella Ragonese) are not falling in love with eligible young men, but each other. To overcome the condemnation of a lesbian relationship, Angela takes the decision to dress as a man for the rest of her life, so that she can continue to live as Sara's partner. The film is an exploration of the relationship and the difficulties the couple encounter as they try to hide their true nature.

Who R U? (Kria Nai Hong)



Thai horror that mixes up shocks and gore in a story about a boy, Ton, who has locked himself in a room to play video games for five years, communicating with his mother only through cryptic notes. People eventually become curious about Ton's lifestyle, and it is not long before someone crosses an unseen boundary and releases the horrors that exist in the room. The film has also been released as *Haunted Room*. Supposedly based on true events, *Who R U?* has garnered some good reviews on the Internet.