

Gonzo goes to Iraq, sorta

'War Inc' doesn't quite have the courage to check its soul at the door, and ends up with a bleeding heart

BY STEPHEN HOLDEN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK



War, Inc. is gonzo moviemaking with a bleeding heart. A satirical farce that wants to be *Dr Strangelove* for the age of terrorism, it is a zany, nihilistic free-for-all that goes soft.

Giving in to sentiment is an impulse to which Stanley Kubrick, the director of *Dr Strangelove*, whose influence permeates *War, Inc.*, would never have succumbed. A prolonged battle scene set to the *Blue Danube* waltz is pure Kubrick, but it is executed by the director Joshua Seftel without the same icy sense of the absurd. Like much else in the movie, it seems merely derivative.

What bracing misanthropy *War, Inc.* is able to conjure in its early scenes is sabotaged by the presence of the film's prime mover, John Cusack, an actor who even when playing the ultimate cynic can't keep from coming across as a misguided nice guy on the verge of seeing the light. Cusack, who also wrote the screenplay with Mark Leyner and Jeremy Pikser and is one of the film's several producers, stars as Hauser, a samurai-style hit man dispatched to the Middle East in the near future on an assassination mission.

Playing a classic lone gunman and kung fu master with a deadly glint in his eyes while Morricone-style cowboy music twangs in the background, Cusack still looks and sounds like a softy. His destination is the Emerald City (read the Green Zone) in the fictional Turaqistan (read Iraq), a country occupied

by Tamerlane (read Halliburton), a corporation run by an unnamed former vice president of the US (Dan Aykroyd, doing a dead-on parody of Dick Cheney).

Snarling out of one corner of his mouth while sitting on a toilet, the vice president boasts that the continuing conflict between Tamerlane and insurgent forces is the first war ever outsourced to private enterprise. As a trade show begins, a chorus line of women with prosthetic legs dances. Their prostheses are Tamerlane products.

His aide, Marsha Dillon (Joan Cusack), is an enraged sourpuss who suggests an exponentially more disagreeable Mary Matalin. Joan Cusack's harshly funny portrayal, and the performances of Aykroyd and Ben Kingsley as Walken, an evil puppetmaster and CIA honcho, are the movie's strongest because their characters don't have souls. This being a satire, why should they?

Hauser's assignment is to kill Omar Sharif (Lubomir Neikov), an upstart Middle Eastern oil minister who wants to build his own pipeline through Turaqistan, thwarting Tamerlane's intention to corner the country's natural resources. Outside the Emerald City, where Hauser occasionally ventures, Turaqistan appears to have been already reduced to rubble. But the battle rages on, and chaos reigns.

The cover story for Hauser's visit is his job description as producer of the Brand USA Trade Show, whose centerpiece will be the wedding of Yonica Babyyeah (Hilary Duff), the Britney Spears of Central Asia. Duff breaks out of her everygirl persona to play this spoiled, squirming kohl-eyed vamp, who growls *I Want to Blow You Up* with every innuendo intact and travels with a posse of ersatz gangsters. Inside this predatory tramp, however, beats the heart of a lost little girl.



John Cusack, above, and Marisa Tomei, right, star in *War, Inc.*, directed by Joshua Seftel. PHOTOS COURTESY OF LONG SHONG



Hauser, the tough guy who swigs shots of hot sauce without shedding a tear, falls in love with Natalie Hegaluzen (Marisa Tomei), a liberal journalist who shows up on the scene. When she is kidnapped and threatened with beheading after venturing outside the Emerald City, Hauser gets to play the hero.

You can sense the rage and disgust simmering behind *War, Inc.*, but they seldom reach a full boil. The movie is repeatedly sidetracked as it glimpses new satirical targets. A particularly distracting cause celebre is a plan to market a pornographic video of Yonica's wedding night.

The problem with gonzo moviemaking, in this case, is that nothing really adds up. What initially appears whimsical eventually seems sloppy. And when the bleeding heart kicks in, you feel betrayed.

Film Notes

WAR, INC

DIRECTED BY: JOSHUA SEFTEL

STARRING: JOHN CUSACK (HAUSER), HILARY DUFF (YONICA BABYYEAH), MARISA TOMEI (NATALIE HEGALUZEN), JOAN CUSACK (MARSHA DILLON), BEN KINGSLEY (WALKEN/THE VICEROY), LUBOMIR NEIKOV (OMAR SHARIF), DAN AYKROYD (MR VICE PRESIDENT)

RUNNING TIME: 106 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY



Brendan Fraser stars in *The Air I Breathe*, directed by Jieho Lee. PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUBLEEDGE

Gangsterism as an allegory for life's basic themes

BY STEPHEN HOLDEN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

The Air I Breathe is an ingenious contraption that holds your attention for as long as it whirs and clicks like a mechanized Rubik's Cube. After it's over, however, you may find yourself scratching your head and wondering if there was any purpose to this sleek little gizmo.

The debut feature of Jieho Lee, a Korean-American director and screenwriter who, in the production notes, calls it a reflection of his "journey as an Asian-American" in a "bimodal world," *The Air I Breathe* smoothers in its own pretensions. Among other things, Lee declares, it is a film noir variation of *The Wizard of Oz* and an exploration of the theme of character as destiny. Whew! That's an awful lot of concepts for one movie to juggle.

A hard-boiled allegory that consists of four vignettes whose characters bleed from one episode into the next, the film was inspired by a Chinese proverb that divides life into four categories: happiness, sorrow, pleasure and love. Three of the four vignettes feature an unnamed character, portrayed by a star, who represents one of the basic feelings. (But what about anger, an emotion that is plentiful in a movie with very little pleasure and little or no genuine happiness?)

What unfolds is a flashy example of the everything-is-connected mode of filmmaking embodied by movies like *Short Cuts*, *Crash* and *Babel*, but the connections in *The Air I Breathe* are paradoxical philosophic abstractions lacking geographic and cultural resonance. In the first episode, "Happiness," Forest Whitaker — playing against type as a cowering milquetoast with a low-level banking job — overhears his colleagues planning to bet on a rigged horse race. Impulsively betting his life savings, he runs afoul of the scheme's mastermind, Fingers (Andy Garcia), a gangster who mutilates debtors' hands; his only hope of avoiding that fate is to rob a bank.

In "Pleasure," Fingers' soft-spoken hit man (Brendan Fraser) is instructed to take his boss's hotheaded young nephew Tony (Emile Hirsch) out on the town and show him the ropes. While night crawling, the henchman, whose talent for seeing into the future is prized by his employer, has ominous flashes of how the evening will end; unexpectedly, his visions don't pan out. Rid of a gift that has also been a curse, he experiences the same giddy sense of liberation as Whitaker's reckless gambler and bank robber.

In "Sorrow," Sarah Michelle Gellar plays Trista, aka Sorrow, a terrorized pop star who becomes Fingers' property after he buys her contract to settle a debt. Fraser's character, a thug with a soft spot, impulsively hides her from Fingers and falls in love with her against his better judgment.

"Love," the final episode, stars Kevin Bacon as a doctor who desperately tries to save the love of his life (Julie Delpy) — who happens to be his best friend's wife — after she is bitten by a poisonous snake and requires a transfusion of a rare blood type. Circular in structure, the movie, to make its final connection, returns to Whitaker's character in a delicious life-or-death moment.

The film's most fully realized characters are Garcia's cold-blooded killer (this is his strongest screen performance in years) and Hirsch's gun-and-girl-crazy nephew. Because Fingers pulls the plot strings in all four vignettes, *The Air I Breathe* ultimately registers as a gangster movie with delusions of grandeur.

Film Notes

THE AIR I BREATHE

DIRECTED BY: JIEHO LEE

STARRING: BRENDAN FRASER (PLEASURE), SARAH MICHELLE GELLAR (SORROW), KEVIN BACON (LOVE), FOREST WHITAKER (HAPPINESS), EMILE HIRSCH (TONY), ANDY GARCIA (FINGERS), CECILIA SUAREZ (ALLISON), JULIE DELPY (GINA)

RUNNING TIME: 97 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

The cost of collusion, paid in phony currency

Concentration camp inmates face terrible choices in 'The Counterfeiters,' winner of the 2008 Oscar for best foreign-language picture

BY A. O. SCOTT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

The Italian writer Primo Levi, looking back on his time in Auschwitz, observed that in the Nazi death camps "the worst, that is, the fittest, survived." *The Counterfeiters*, a brisk, tough new movie from the Austrian director Stefan Ruzowitzky, is in some ways an illustration of this axiom. Like most films about the Holocaust it is a survivor's tale, and its protagonist, at least at first, seems long on guile and short on scruple. He is Salomon Sorowitsch, a master forger and a fixture of the Berlin underworld, and his yellow star is overlaid with a green triangle marking his status as a "habitual criminal."

This causes some discomfort among some of the other inmates at the Sachsenhausen camp, where Sorowitsch is recruited for an unusual work detail. An

enterprising Nazi officer, who had arrested Sally before the war for falsifying currency, enlists him in a scheme to counterfeit British and American money. The plan — based on the real-life Operation Bernhard — is to destabilize the economies of those countries with large-scale infusions of fake pounds and dollars.

In exchange for their labor, Sally and his colleagues are given extraordinary privileges: civilian clothing, weekly showers, sheets and pillows on their beds. And this fragile good fortune provides *The Counterfeiters* with its ethical center of gravity. The questions Ruzowitzky poses are both stark and complicated. How much cooperation with evil is justified in the name of survival? How can the imperative to stay alive compete with the obligations to help others, and to oppose injustice?

Film Notes

THE COUNTERFEITERS

DIRECTED BY: STEFAN RUZOWITZKY

STARRING: KARL MARKOVICS (SALOMON SOROWITSCH), AUGUST DIEHL (ADOLF BURGER), DEVID STRIESOW (FRIEDRICH HERZOG), DOLORES CHAPLIN (THE RED-HAIRED WOMAN), AUGUST ZIRNER (DR KLINGER), MARIE BAUMER (AGLAIA)

RUNNING TIME: 98 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

LANGUAGE: IN GERMAN WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

Sally, played by a remarkable, hatchet-faced actor with the striking name Karl Markovics,



Austrian actor Karl Markovics, left, plays a master forger in *The Counterfeiters*. PHOTO: AP

designated man of principle. A left-wing activist, he was imprisoned for printing anti-Nazi leaflets, and he struggles to maintain a clear view of the political implications of his and the others' actions. He decides to slow down Operation Bernhard by sabotaging the counterfeiting process, a delay that threatens the lives of his co-workers and brings him into conflict with Sorowitsch, who sometimes seems to view their assignment as a professional challenge more than anything else.

But if Sally Sorowitsch is a crook, he is also something of an artist, and Markovics, without sentimentalizing the character, allows us glimpses of his soul. His performance is a tour de force of concentration and understatement, and it gives Ruzowitzky's

approaches these conundrums not with the discipline of a philosopher, but rather with the self-protective instincts of an outlaw. He does, nonetheless, adhere to the rudiments of a thief's code of honor surveying every new situation for possible risks and advantages and refusing, under any circumstances, to squeal on a comrade.

He thus charts a zigzagging path

between two other major characters: Herzog (Devid Striesow), the cynical, jocular Nazi who oversees Bernhard, and Burger (August Diehl), an idealistic prisoner who wants to subvert the plan.

Burger, whose wide brow and upright carriage stand in pronounced contrast to Sorowitsch's darting eyes and spidery movements, is the film's

sometimes schematic narrative a jolt of realism. *The Counterfeiters* is a swift and suspenseful thriller, and perhaps a little too entertaining for its own good. The grim scenes in Sachsenhausen are framed by a visit to postwar Monte Carlo that adds a queasy touch of romanticism to the tale.

I suppose that is a built-in dilemma of the Holocaust movie as a genre. Filmmakers either try to take the full, horrible measure of the subject, at the risk of overwhelming or alienating a modern audience, or else, in trying to make the story bearable, they subvert its truth. *The Counterfeiters*, in the manner of its flawed, fascinating hero, tries in good faith to navigate this ethically treacherous ground. That it succeeds more than it fails owes something to Ruzowitzky's skill and good sense, and even more to his lead actor's instinct and conviction.

F I L M R E V I E W