

FILM REVIEW

'Mediterranean Food' provides light fare

The bedroom, not the kitchen, is at the center of Joaquín Oristrell's latest film

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SWALLOW WINGS FILM COMPANY

Director Joaquín Oristrell's film *Mediterranean Food* (Dieta Mediterránea) follows in a long line of distinguished food movies. Like many of these movies, it is not really about food at all. Perhaps food is too essential a topic to be easily isolated, inevitably extending its range to all the realms of our senses and passions. One thinks with fondness of how food is used as an allegory, a metaphor, a code and a symbol for all that is most fundamental to us in films like *Babette's Feast* (1987) or *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* (1994), *Delicatessen* (1991) and *Tampopo* (1987). Whatever else they are about, they never forget the simple thing about food: that it is something we eat. At the other extreme, the food movie has also been callously misused as nothing more than a sexy backdrop to celebrity posturing in utterly superficial concoctions such as Catherine Zeta-Jones' *No Reservation* (2007) and Penelope Cruz's *Woman on Top* (2000).

Mediterranean Food falls somewhere between those two extremes. It tells the story of Sofia (Olivia Molina) from her childhood at a small seaside cantina to becoming a famous chef, a journey she accomplishes not just through her passion for food, but also through her passion for the two men in her life: the steady Toni (Paco Leon) and the venturesome Frank (Alfonso Bassave). They both appeal to different aspects of her personality and her ambition, and she is not really prepared to give up either of them. It helps



that one is good with accounts, the other a talented maître d'hotel.

It is a situation not without comic potential, but Oristrell seems content to take the easy path and turns *Mediterranean Food* into a story about how Sophia manages to get her cake and eat it too, as she successfully talks the two men into a ménage à trois that has the local community up in arms.

Molina gives a spirited performance as Sophia, the girl who wants to make it in the male-dominated world of the restaurant kitchen, but her two male admirers let her down badly, with Paco Leon's Toni never getting much

beyond the comic innocent; though this is somewhat preferable to Alfonso Bassave channeling early Antonio Banderas.

The film gets off to a promising start, and there is an interesting idea that lurks in the background about seemingly incompatible combinations (whether of ingredients or people) turning out to be marriages made in heaven if approached with the right kind of zest for life and all its riches. Sadly, the development of this, or any other theme, rapidly takes a back seat to sex, and the director goes for some easy gags about three-ways and a swelling homoerotic relationship between

the two men. The film wants to be bold and sexually daring, but it fritters away any real tension, satisfied to generate some tittering laughter with its sexual high jinks.

Occasionally the film throws up interesting observations about food and the ways it can become part of our lives, but the director does not really know what to do with them, and lets them flop back down with a disappointing thump. The bedroom rather than the kitchen is at the center of the movie, and it doesn't help that the filmmakers seem to confuse Japanese *kaiseki* cuisine with the techniques of molecular gastronomy.

Good food movies are all

Film Notes

MEDITERRANEAN FOOD

DIRECTED BY:
JOAQUÍN ORISTRELL

STARRING:
OLIVIA MOLINA (SOFIA), PACO LEON (TONI), ALFONSO BASSAVE (FRANK), CARMEN BALAGUE (LOREN), ROBERTO ALVAREZ (RAMON), JESUS CASTEJON (PEPE RIPOLL)

RUNNING TIME:
100 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
IN SPANISH WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

about attention to detail, and the food in this film is never given the same kind of close attention that is lavished on Bassave's admittedly rather fine buttocks. Oristrell, who did well at the Barcelona Film Festival and picked up a Sundance nomination for *Unconscious* (2004), a humorous take on the world of psychoanalysis, clearly has intellectual pretensions. They are evident in *Mediterranean Food*, but here remain nothing more than pretensions as he gets sidetracked into a lightweight romantic comedy that makes up for the lack of jokes with a smattering of risqué situations.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

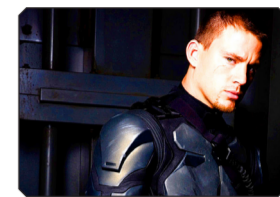
Yellow Sheep River (黃羊川)

This unorthodox Taiwanese documentary about remote Chinese rural villages is screening until next Friday at Cinema7 (formerly known as Spring Cinema Galaxy) in Ximending after earning a good reputation at the Taipei Film Festival. Impressionistic rather than narrative-driven, the director has assembled a series of vignettes of humanity and geographical beauty — all linked together by a wandering blind musician. Screening without subtitles in any language, the politics of it all, if any, is in the eye of the beholder.



G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra

For most kids growing up decades ago, G.I. Joe was a straightforward action figure. The protagonist of this effects-laden sequel seems to bear little resemblance to the macho grunt, though there's still plenty of action and plenty of macho traipsing around, even if the futuristic setting dilutes the classic Rambo aesthetic. In this one, our heroes are intercepted by agents belonging to Quantum, er, "Cobra," as they transport powerful weapons from A to B. Anyone still reeling from the *Transformers* sequel (whose action figures are owned by the same company that peddles G.I. Joe and friends) might want to pass on this one, but if you're into watching French national landmarks bite the dust and can't get enough of the sandy expanses of Egypt, then this is the film for you. From the director of *The Mummy*.



Mia and the Migou

Mia is a little girl who must battle dastardly developers with their eyes on prime forest and rescue her father from a mining accident. Never fear: There is a strange creature — a migou — that will help her in her quest. This animated film from a pro-environment French film studio was apparently six years in the making, and some may wonder where all the time and money was spent. The migou, by the way, appears to be a European take on the yeti, or Abominable Snowman.



Doraemon: Nobita and the Green Giant Legend

Our best blue friend returns in this entry that was released in Japan early last year. Doraemon's buddy Nobita manages to turn a sapling into a smart little boy, which is splendid for all the family — until a threat to all Earth's trees emerges from another planet. There's more credible action than the *G.I. Joe* sequel, more environmental credibility than *Mia and the Migou* and, for kids, more laughs than *Bruno*.



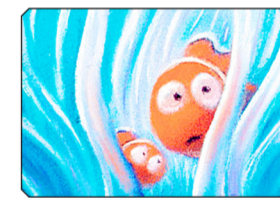
7eenty 5ive

The tired gimmicks start with the alphanumeric title and continue with a weirdo offering a bunch of "college students" who look even older than the balding lechers of *Porky's Revenge*. Dork graduate friends think prank calls are a fun way of wasting time until one of the recipients turns out to have a psychopathic urge. Cue the domino effect of "teen" slaughter. That fine Dutch actor Rutger Hauer, who must have needed the work, is not even top billed here as a cop who cleans up after some messy conversations. Starts tomorrow.



Pixar: 20 Years of Animation

Last week, one of animation studio Pixar's best offerings, *Up*, opened in Taipei. From today, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum hosts a traveling exhibition devoted to the history of Pixar, including drawings, digital paintings, sculptures, sketches, installations and — of course — short films. This is a treat for kids and movie/animation lovers of all ages — and a milestone in the history of a studio that set new standards for not just animation but movies in general. For more details see the museum's Web site at www.tfam.museum, and don't miss Noah Buchan's article in Thursday's edition of the *Taipei Times*, which includes an interview with the exhibition's curator, Elyse Klaidman.



Cobalt Blue

This beautifully titled and filmed Japanese feature crept into a single Taipei theater last week with no fanfare. Set in Okinawa, this is the story of three friends who grow up together, only for the dynamics between them to change when romance enters the frame. If you loved *Cape No. 7*, then this one might be of interest.



FILM REVIEW

Simplicity unveils a complex character in 'Yang Yang'

With Ang Lee on board, 'Yang Yang' is being touted as the first feature film produced by Khan Lee as part of the Lee brothers' efforts to nurture local directors

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

After working with Sandrine Pinna (張榕容) in his feature debut *Do Over* (一年之初) in 2006, director Cheng Yu-chieh (鄭有傑) wrote *Yang Yang*, a character-driven, coming-of-age story tailor-made for his half-Taiwanese, half-French star. Tackling a story line that could easily stray into sudsy teenage romance or family melodrama territory, director Cheng eschews formulaic storytelling and spins an engaging yarn about a young woman's struggle with identity and love while keeping lead character Yang Yang's Eurasian qualities at the center of the narration.

The film opens with a long, handheld take that sets the tone for the rest of the movie. The intimate camera follows Yang Yang (Pinna), a university athlete

born of a Taiwanese mother and a French father she never knew, as she greets guests and friends. It is her mother's wedding day, and the groom is the girl's track coach.

On the surface, Yang Yang seems close to her new step-sister Xiao-ru (何思慧), a fellow student and track-and-field athlete. But the hidden jealousy and rivalry between the two soon emerge as the prettier Yang Yang draws the attention of Xiao-ru's boyfriend Shawn (Bryant Chang, 張睿家).

Things turn hopelessly sour when Xiao-ru finds out about Yang Yang's fling with Shawn. Feeling guilty and hurt, Yang Yang leaves home and starts a modeling and acting career under the management of Ming-ren (Huang Chien-wei, 黃健瑋).

Yang Yang's new life isn't at all a smooth ride. But frustration

and disappointment seem integral to her personal quest to find her place in the world.

Much more focused and controlled than Cheng's messy debut *Do Over*, which weaves together five parallel stories with different styles, *Yang Yang* tells a simple story and makes it work. Shot mostly in long takes with handheld camera and natural lighting, it succeeds in mesmerizing audiences with an intimate and genuine feel. Jake Pollock's fluid lens moves among characters as if it is an invisible performer capturing, receiving and responding to nuanced gestures and fleeting emotions. The shaky, sometimes underexposed and out-of-focus images manifest the characters' inner tumults, angst and desires.

Cheng's Yang Yang is a young woman adept at emotional

deception. Having always been at the center of attention for her Eurasian looks, Yang Yang has the habit of smiling and hiding how she thinks and feels when facing others who are just as complicated and calculating as herself. Such a complex character is many actress' dream role, and Pinna lives up to expectations with a compelling performance imbued with emotional depth and charisma.

Ultimately, *Yang Yang* is all about its young star. In the film's coda, the 22-year-old actress runs silently and alone at dawn with beads of sweat running down her face. She gasps for air, but continues to run toward an unknown destination. The image Pinna leaves on celluloid is one of a heroine who is flawed and vulnerable, but striving to stand on her own.



Golden Horse Best Actress nominee Sandrine Pinna excels in *Yang Yang*'s title role.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ZEUS INTERNATIONAL PRODUCTION

Film Notes

YANG YANG
陽陽

DIRECTED BY:
CHENG YU-CHIEH (鄭有傑)

STARRING:
SANDRINE PINNA (張榕容)
AS YANG YANG, BRYANT CHANG (張睿家) AS SHAWN, HE SI-HUI (何思慧) AS XIAO-RU, HUANG CHIEN-WEI (黃健瑋) AS MING-REN

RUNNING TIME:
112 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
IN MANDARIN WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY