

FILM REVIEW



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Imagining the unimaginable

'City of Life and Death' attempts to come to grips with the Nanjing Massacre

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Seventy-two years after the Nanjing Massacre, the atrocity remains an unresolved trauma. China estimates a death toll of some 300,000, while Japan has yet to offer a formal written apology. In Chinese director Lu Chuan's (陸川) third feature *City of Life and Death* (南京!南京!), this sensitive subject is given a dramatic contour that fortunately dwells neither on excessive grief nor nationalistic indignation.

Shot in black and white, the artistically accomplished film takes a gut-wrenching look at the brutalities that took place during a six-week period starting in December 1937. Not afraid of portraying the blurring of moral boundaries on either side of the conflict, director Lu chooses to show the irrationality of war through a succession of events centering on a small number of characters, both Chinese and Japanese, examining humanity in its faults and virtues.

It is the winter of 1937. We follow a Japanese soldier and enter the devastated Chinese capital of Nanjing. The camera

shifts to a Chinese resistance fighter (played by Liu Ye, 劉燁) and his men. Suddenly there is an exchange of machine gun fire and exploding grenades. We can hardly tell the Japanese soldiers from the Chinese fighters as the camera frantically switches perspective back and forth between the two sides who are shown as equals in terms of mettle and morality.

We then move deeper into the city with young Japanese soldier Kadokawa (Hideo Nakaizumi). He and his fellow soldiers stumble upon a church where Chinese men, women and children have taken shelter. Kadokawa trembles, rushes out and screams for backup. His cries linger amid the devastated landscape.

The city is soon filled with corpses of executed Chinese soldiers and civilians. Those who manage to survive find shelter in a refuge area operated by a score of Westerners including the "good Nazi" John Rabe (John Paisley). Female teacher Jiang (Gao Yuanyuan, 高圓圓) helps to oversee the camp and is a heroic archetype willing to risk her life

Film Notes

CITY OF LIFE AND DEATH
南京!南京!

DIRECTED BY:
LU CHUAN (陸川)

STARRING:
LIU YE (劉燁) AS LU JIANXIONG,
GAO YUANYUAN (高圓圓)
AS MISS JIANG, HIDEO NAKAIZUMI
AS KADOKAWA, FAN WEI (范偉)
AS MR TANG

RUNNING TIME:
135 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
IN MANDARIN, JAPANESE,
ENGLISH AND SHANGHAISE WITH
CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

to save others. Rabe's Chinese assistant Tang (Fan Wei, 范偉) plays the role of collaborator as he tries to save his family by striking a deal with the Japanese.

Meanwhile, the camera takes us on a journey through the conflicted Kadokawa's own personal hell, as he is destroyed bit by bit by the inhumanity that surrounds him.

To visualize an atrocity rarely visited by cinema, director Lu blends gripping realism with a lyrical style that gives his imagery its haunting power. The elegant black-and-white cinematography by Cao Yu (曹郁) exudes a sense of sober detachment and spares the audience from experiencing the full effect of the violence and gore, which may have appeared intolerably monstrous if filmed in color.

However, as a dramatic reflection on a national trauma, the film is designed to imagine the unimaginable. The bulk of the film shows civilians and soldiers being herded into groups and massacred, women gang raped and children killed. The violence is portrayed in an almost matter-of-fact manner. It sickens and repels, but posits

no deeper significance. Strangely enough, it is only when the director is done with the raping and killing that his cinematic poetry begins to surface, enthralling the audience with its rich complexity of composition and imagery.

With production designer Hao Yi's (郝藝) sets of destroyed buildings and streets, Nanjing resembles an impressionistic limbo that reflects the psychological frenzy and spiritual void of its inhabitants. The Japanese soldiers look no better than their ghostly victims, tramping through the desolate landscape like phantoms.

The most unforgettable cinematic moment takes place toward the end of the film. A Japanese victory ritual is performed with rhythmic drumming and dancing by soldiers. The men perform ceremonial gestures, slowly marching down the empty, ruined streets. The sight is eerie and unworlly, much like the atrocity itself. An unthinkable horror has been rendered in cinematic form right before our eyes, yet it remains unfathomable even seven decades later.

FILM REVIEW



This is It was made using behind-the-scenes footage of Michael Jackson's last rehearsals as he prepared for a marathon run of farewell concerts in London.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES

beginning or end. It's padded with mind-numbing scenes of dancers learning their moves. And the star, whose name appears in the title, seems completely unaware that he's on camera.

Directed by Kenny Ortega, the choreographer who was helping the 50-year-old Jackson prepare for his marathon run of farewell concerts at London's O2 Arena, *This Is It* certainly doesn't offer any real insight on Jackson's condition during those final days. He appears physically fit. But mentally? It's hard to tell.

The rehearsal clips are as exhilarating as they are frustrating. They appear to have been shot on just three separate occasions — often out of focus, grainy and almost always filmed by a handheld camera by someone standing as far back as possible.

When we move in closer, Jackson looks like he's distracted, lost in his own world. Subtitles appear every time he speaks, but they don't always make it easier to understand what he's saying.

Film Notes

MICHAEL JACKSON'S THIS IS IT

DIRECTED BY:
KENNY ORTEGA

STARRING:
MICHAEL JACKSON

RUNNING TIME:
112 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
CURRENTLY SHOWING

Ortega, who also made the *High School Musical* and *Hannah Montana* movies, treats Jackson like one of his 15-year-old charges. In one scene, as Jackson rises up on a cherry picker, the choreographer yells loudly and slowly, "Michael, please hold on!"

Jackson doesn't quite come off as a musical visionary or a nitpicker whose entire focus falls on how the songs end. He repeatedly instructs the musicians to, "let it simmer." He complains about the in-ear monitors that have become a standard part of performing live. "It feels like a fist in your ear," he says. And judging

by the reactions of those around him, his presence at the rehearsals is a rarity.

There's also no getting over his appearance — the ski-jump nose, exaggerated chin and trembling white fingers — blown up large on the screen. During the elaborate production for *Thriller*, which aims to modernize the original video with live dancers, there's a grim chill that comes from watching the pale man in his Ed Hardy sweatpants and black bomber jacket, now deceased, dancing in front of a throng of zombies.

It's when Jackson's muscle memory kicks in during loose performances of *I'll Be There*, *Human Nature* and *Beat It* (sometimes with the studio tracks playing on top) that everything comes together, giving this film most of its thrust. After putting his heart and soul into *Billie Jean*, Jackson shrugs, "At least we get a feel for it."

There's no doubt that if they actually happened, the concerts would have been spectacular.

But there's no payoff at the end of *This Is It*. Not only do we not get to see opening night, but we don't get to see what happened when that fateful phone call came on June 25, leaving many walking out of the theater asking, "Was that it?"

Was that it?

Zombies, pole dancers and bad plastic surgery jostle for attention as the King of Pop intrigues and confounds in equal measure

BY AIDIN VAZIRI
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SAN FRANCISCO

There's a simple disclaimer at the beginning of *Michael Jackson's This Is It*. It reads, "For the fans." It shouldn't be ignored. Those that stuck with the troubled pop icon after his universe shifted from the charts to the tabloids probably will find equal measures of inspiration and heartbreak in the documentary. For everyone else, it's a strange offering.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Saw VI

Jigsaw is back — and he's still dead. Never mind; there are plenty of flashbacks to keep the ghostly Tobin Bell cast as the moralist from hell for another year. This time he or his acolytes are after a deserving chap who deals in health insurance, and assorted other victims. Reliable reviewers thought this one stacked up pretty well given that the series is running out of scope and room for plot twists. Even so, it was ambushed at the US box office by a long-delayed, *Blair Witch*-style horror movie called *Paranormal Activity*. That film is due for release on Dec. 11.



The Devil's Tomb

Cuba Gooding Jr, Ron Perlman and Ray Winstone head the cast of this underground action movie in which Cuba and badass military mercenary colleagues set out to rescue a group of archeologists from a most sinister location — and begin suffering hallucinations, *Event Horizon*-style, when they run into something not of this Earth. Not for the discerning film buff, perhaps, but it does star Henry Rollins as a priest and Bill Moseley (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, *The Devil's Rejects*) as an oddball professor. This directorial debut of actor Jason Connery (son of Sean) went straight to DVD in the US.



Old Fish (千鈞一髮)

An unusual Chinese police drama, to say the least. A Harbin cop is forced — and able — to defuse a time bomb thanks to his engineering background, only to find that more and more explosives are being planted in the area, and his superiors want him to keep doing the dirty work. Is Dennis Hopper on the loose? Ma Guowei (馬國偉) plays "Old Fish," the put-upon policeman, in an award-winning turn. Directed by Gao Qunshu (高群書), who co-directed *The Message* (風聲), which is currently on release.



Plastic City (蕩寇)

A Chinese crook (Anthony Wong, 黃秋生) and his cooler-than-cool adopted Japanese son struggle to keep their enterprise afloat in Sao Paulo, Brazil, when rivals and the authorities turn on them, including a Taiwanese entrepreneur.



Critics said the fascinating idea behind the film and its visual distinctiveness were undercut by avoidable technical problems (dubbing, for starters) and a stereotypically art house divergence from coherent narrative — not to mention stylistic lapses that verge on the silly.

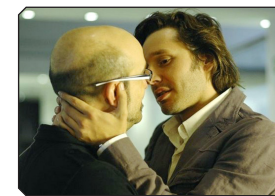
Vengeance (復仇)

Johnnie To (杜琪峰) is a Hong Kong director who has kept pumping out solid action flicks over the years. He probably doesn't have as much international exposure as he should, but this film may help to change that. The lead actor is legendary French singer Johnny Hallyday, who arrives in Macau after his daughter is nearly killed in a triad hit (the rest of her family is wiped out). Hallyday, now a chef, must draw on his unsavory past to accomplish his vengeful mission — but that past is disappearing as an old injury accelerates his amnesia. Co-stars include the formidable Anthony Wong (黃秋生) as a criminal (again) and Simon Yam (任達華) as a triad boss.



Chef's Special

Chef's Special throws together a bunch of funny characters centered around a restaurant in Spain whose chef is struggling to cope with life's challenges, though vengeance plays no role this time. It's a comedy, so things can only get more chaotic; in this case, the chef finds himself in a relationship with his new neighbor despite the fact that one of his female employees wants the man for herself — and that's only one plot line. Vibrant and amusing, this is a crowd-pleaser that stands out in a busy week of releases.



The Song of Sparrows

Iranian filmmakers regularly deliver outstanding product, and while this award-winning drama from last year may not be in the top tier, it should please fans of Middle East cinema. A worker at an ostrich farm loses his job and travels to Tehran, where he struggles to maintain his sense of self as the urban environment closes in around him, leading to a tragedy — or so it seems. Salon.com called this visually handsome film "leisurely and lovely." Directed by Majid Majidi, who has built a solid reputation over the years.



Where Are We Going?

The *Japan Times* praised this unusual romantic drama in which a taciturn, mistreated young gay man falls in love with a transsexual. Murder is the result, but the film violates any number of moralistic film conventions by being firmly on the side of the protagonists. Starts tomorrow at the Baixue theater in Ximending as part of a promotion for its DVD release.



Angels on a Pin (針尖上的天使)

Finally, a quick mention for a short (17-minute) film by Taiwanese director Wu Mi-sen (吳米森) at the Spot theater in Taipei. The three screenings have been changed from the original calendar to late tonight and early tomorrow and Sunday evening. Entry is free; tickets will be available on a first-come, first-served basis an hour before each session.

