

FILM REVIEW

The invincible matriarch

Selected as South Korea's submission to the Oscars this year, 'Mother' is another example of why director Bong Joon-ho is the country's most brilliant young auteur

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

As proven by his serial-killer mystery *Memories of Murder* (2003) and box-office record-breaking monster flick *The Host* (2006), South Korea's Bong Joon-ho is a director who is adept at knitting a high level of entertainment with socio-political commentary.

For his latest work, *Mother*, Bong returns to the crime-thriller genre to tell a cleverly crafted story about a widow's attempt to clear the name of her mentally and emotionally handicapped son, who has been accused of murder.

Revolving around the commanding central performance by veteran television thespian Kim Hye-ja, the film tones down the director's fondness for broad messages and

zooms in on maternal love pushed to extremes. It is both a well-executed noir thriller and a disturbing portrait of motherhood.

The film opens with Hye-ja (Kim Hye-ja), a long-widowed mother, chopping herbs inside a dingy herbal shop she runs to make ends meet in a small town. All the while, she stays alert to what happens on the street where her mentally handicapped son Do-joon (played by the almost unrecognizable heartthrob Won Bin) plays with a dog.

Suddenly, a Mercedes Benz knocks her son over and speeds off. Unhurt, Do-joon and his foul-tempered friend Jin-tae (Jin Goo) pursue the automobile to a golf course, where the dim-witted Do-joon collects several golf balls before he and his friend get into a dustup with the well-to-do hit-and-runners.

The next day, one of Do-joon's golf balls is found next to a murdered high school girl. An easy target for the lazy police to extract a confession, the young man is quickly convicted and jailed.

Finding no help from either the cops or the lawyer, Hye-ja, convinced that her son is innocent, takes matters into her own hands and embarks on a crusade to find the real killer.

Once the investigation begins, *Mother* kicks into high gear, honing a polished murder mystery filled with unexpected turns and twists. Tensions escalate as the film spirals in flashbacks and revelations that divulge dark secrets harbored inside the rural community and yet refuse to entirely mold the audience's knowledge of the killer's identity. The mood-drenched cinema-

tography helps to create an aura of disquiet and foreboding with a stark palette of gloomy blues and greens.

The true genius of Bong is shown in the director's wedding genre conventions with his own idiosyncratic vision that, in the case of *Mother*, blends maternal devotion with a diabolical murder to create a disturbingly loving and vicious human portrait.

More surprisingly, Bong is able to tell the audience everything they need to know about his compelling heroine even before the real narrative sets in. In the pre-credit sequence, Hye-ja dances on a meadow to the imaginary music in her head. She is graceful and alone, her wide, vacant eyes exuding

poignant emotions that haunt the audience long after the end credits roll.

Without a doubt, the film's most mesmerizing aspect is watching Hye-ja, the indomitable matriarch gradually turn into an inhuman force. The familiar small-town setting is reminiscent of Bong's *Memories of Murder* in its ability to capture the mindset of a rural community. In *Mother*, the village is populated by scoundrels, whores and idiots for whom Hollywood-style justice and moral naivete are truly a fairy tale.

In the last, flickering shot, a murderer joins a group on a party bus. The passengers sing and dance like fools, while the murderer seems at once the most lucid and the craziest of them all.

Film Notes

MOTHER

DIRECTED BY:
BONG JOON-HO

STARRING:
KIM HYE-JA (HYE-JA),
WON BIN (DO-JOON),
JIN GOO (JIN-TAE)

LANGUAGE:
IN KOREAN WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

RUNNING TIME:
129 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

PHOTO COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

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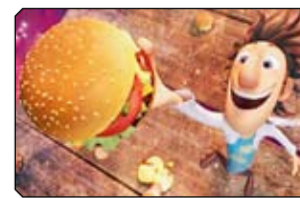
PHOTO COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs

Sensational 3D animation and a healthy sense of humor are on the menu for families who flock to this movie about an island in the



Atlantic plagued with gastronomic precipitation. A young inventor develops a machine that converts water into food, turning his island home from a sardine factory into a tourist draw. But things get out of control as the increasingly outrageous food growths threaten everything. Even 3D skeptic Roger Ebert was impressed, calling this the best technical presentation yet. Features the voices of Bill Hader, Anna Faris, James Caan, Bruce Campbell and Mr T. Also screening in IMAX format.

Home

A highlight among this week's new releases is the French-language Swiss feature *Home*, a caustic, even surreal drama about a family whose



property and very unity are compromised when an old road nearby is converted into a motorway. Isabelle Huppert is the matriarch of the clan. Movie buffs, like some critics, will have noticed the link to famous traffic panic sequences in earlier French films, but the focus here is familial and environmental more than sociopolitical. Also boasts a first-class poster depicting Huppert in the kitchen and her eldest daughter in the yard giving a speeding truck the finger.

Fish Story

The remaining five releases this week are Japanese. The first, and probably best, is *Fish Story*, a humble production of varying tone but with real creativity and ambition to entertain. Several interweaving stories over different periods of time eventually provide an answer to why the titular punk song from 1970s Japan could end up saving the world from a colossal heavenly object. Based on a book and not a manga, for once.



Kamui

Alas, back to manga adaptations with this historical action movie about a talented young ninja who is rejected by his criminal brethren and opts for near-hermitage. Unfortunately, as with so many loners in narratives like this, the poor fellow's attempts to lead a quiet life are frustrated when a budding romantic relationship goes south at the hands of his prowling former colleagues. Fanboys mocked the computer-generated special effects even more than the lack of action; the bigger question is why CG should be necessary at all. The *Lone Wolf and Cub* series didn't use them ... say no more.



Oblivion Island: Haruka and the Magic Mirror

This different-looking anime production also stands out for featuring a female lead (Haruka) instead of the male teenager beloved of Western movies. Our motherless high school heroine is transported to an island world composed of things rejected by the human world, and she decides to set off in pursuit of a lost hand mirror her mother once gave her — but there are forces unhappy at her presence. Apparently based on a traditional tale, the emotional quotient here might be enough to steer attendant parents in Haruka's direction instead of standard action and violence anime, such as ...



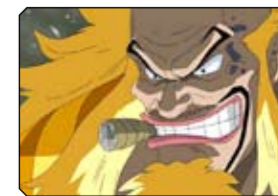
Naruto the Movie Vol. 6

Naruto the ninja is back for even more anime mayhem in this, the third entry in the Shippuden cycle featuring his later exploits. All hell is set to break loose when an evil figure is responsible for the disappearance of key ninja from various villages, setting them against one another. A celestial finale pits him against Naruto and the manipulated townsmen. Also known as *Naruto Shippuden 3: Inheritors of the Will of Fire*.



One Piece Film: Strong World

To finish this week, those irrepressible manga/anime Straw Hat pirates are back in their 10th feature. Navigator Nami is abducted by a fearsome pirate who sends the rest of her colleagues into a fearsome location filled with horrible creatures. *One Piece* creator Eiichiro Oda wrote this entry, which enjoyed extensive box office success in Japan.



FILM REVIEW

More filth than wisdom

'Filth and Wisdom' is the only movie so far to have been directed by Madonna, which, judging from the results, is something to be grateful for

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Since her star turn in Susan Seidelman's *Desperately Seeking Susan*, Madonna has had over two decades to hone her celebrity persona. In *Filth and Wisdom*, in which the singer is credited not only as director and scriptwriter, but also as "creator," the many aspects of this persona are dumped, unceremoniously and in an undigested heap, on the audience. It's not pretty. There is kinky, there is rebellious, there is cross-dressing, there are slabs of dialogue straight out of a motivational self-help manual, and, of course, screams about the starving children in Africa.

Filth and Wisdom sets the scene with three remarkably improbable flatmates. There is the singer A.K. (played by Eugene Hutz, the lead singer of the gypsy punk band Gogol Bordello, whose music features extensively in the film and is probably the most interesting part of the whole 81-minute experience), who desperately tries to get a gig while keeping body and soul together as a dungeon-master providing S&M lite to paying customers. There is Holly the unemployed ballerina, who finds her real self performing as a stripper at an upmarket gentleman's club. A.K. is passionately in love with her, but for all his wild, freakish behavior, finds it impossible to declare his interest. And finally, there is Juliette,



PHOTO COURTESY OF ONEPLEX

who works and pops pills at a drug store owned by pharmacist Sardeep, who spends much of his time making love to her coat in the cloak room as the only way of escaping from his harriidan of a wife.

Even for a *Friends*-style romantic comedy, the improbability factor is astonishingly high right

from the first few minutes of the film. Throw in a blind poet (Richard E. Grant), whose poems inspire A.K.'s songs, and Francine (Francesca Kingdon), Holly's tough love instructor in the arts of pole dance, and it simply goes through the roof. It is impossible to believe in any of the characters, let alone

sympathize with them, and the philosophizing voice-over in a heavy Slavic accent — spoken by Hutz — spouting pop psychology and referencing Nietzsche, is likely to send many members of the audience either to sleep or out the door.

Although utterly inept, there are many moments when *Filth*

Film Notes

FILTH AND WISDOM

DIRECTED BY:
MADONNA

STARRING:
EUGENE HUTZ (A.K.),
VICKY MCCLURE (JULIETTE),
HOLLY WESTON (HOLLY),
RICHARD E. GRANT
(PROFESSOR FLYNN),
INDER MANOCHA (SARDEEP),
ADE (DJ), FRANCESCA KINGDON
(FRANCINE)

RUNNING TIME:
81 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

and *Wisdom* seems on the verge of embarking in some interesting direction. There are times when Madonna's infatuation with style can be briefly mistaken for profundity, but in the end, her dragnet of contemporary issues comes across as an adolescent attempt to impress. For an effort by one of the sharpest players on the international celebrity scene, *Filth and Wisdom* is not only something of a joke, but one that falls flat on its face.