

FILM REVIEW



Glory days

From left: Jet Li, Jason Statham, Sylvester Stallone, Randy Couture and Terry Crews star in *The Expendables*, directed by Sylvester Stallone.

Sylvester Stallone's big action movie *The Expendables* gives the term star vehicle a whole new meaning. Major roles are taken by Jason Statham, Jet Li, Dolph Lundgren, Mickey Rourke and Stallone himself, and there are cameos by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis. Heavyweight boxing champion and MMA (mixed martial arts) specialist Randy Couture, WWF (World Wrestling Federation) star Stone Cold Steve Austin, and other muscular athletes-turned-entertainers are also present. It is a happy get-together of musclemen, who settle down to kick some butt and have some fun.

According to *Celebrity Mania*, a Hollywood news Web site, Stallone said many of these big names waived their customary fees to come along to this party. Stallone had gone out of his way to bring on as many action heroes as possible, but the Web site said that he was snubbed by the likes of Steven Seagal and Jean-Claude Van Damme. There is more than enough muscle on display as there is, though much of it is definitely past its prime.

The story, what there is of it, centers on a group of mercenaries who call themselves The Expendables. They engage in missions around the world,

bringing down bad guys though a combination of overwhelming firepower and exotic martial arts moves. Even at the moments of greatest danger, these hardened professionals can spare a moment for a bit of light banter. They get involved in a mission to take down a South American general who is running drugs under the direction of a rogue CIA operative (Eric Roberts). Suffice to say that this conflict leads to back-to-back car chases, fire fights, brutal martial arts encounters and huge explosions. The film is neither as clever nor as funny as it thinks it is, and it bombards the audience with a hokey mix of philosophizing about violence (mostly from Mickey Rourke's character), and huge delight in portraying it for our delectation.

There is a good deal of violence, some of it quite horrific, including a scene in which romantic interest Giselle Itie undergoes waterboarding and the inflicting of some very nasty knife wounds. It is clearly all meant to be in good fun, but sometimes it verges on the offensively gratuitous.

One of the peculiarities of *The Expendables* is that it doesn't need to bother with creating its characters, for almost all the action heroes in

Sylvester Stallone's new movie is full of aging muscle men on a testosterone-fueled shoot-em up trip that could either make you laugh or cry

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER



Film Notes

THE EXPEDABLES

DIRECTED BY:
SYLVESTER STALLONE

STARRING:
SYLVESTER STALLONE (BARNEY ROSS), JASON STATHAM (LEE CHRISTMAS), JET LI (YING YANG), DOLPH LUNDGREN (GUNNER JENSEN), ERIC ROBERTS (JAMES MUNROE), RANDY COUTURE (TOLL ROAD), STEVE AUSTIN (PAINE), GISELLE ITIE (SANDRA)

RUNNING TIME:
103 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

the film draw, to a greater or lesser extent, on an already established screen persona. For fans of action films, this gives the movie an illusion of greater substance than it actually has, with its host of jocular references to a combined body of work that is truly vast. The use of action stars, as stars, rather than as

characters, is most blatant with the Schwarzenegger cameo, which is introduced simply for the wow of recognition and a single one-liner. Schwarzenegger has moved on from the action hero community, but *The Expendables* is a friendly gathering where old alumni are welcomed back for a session of back slapping and reminiscing about glory days.

In a bit of inter-generational hero-bonding, Lee Christmas (Statham) ribs Stallone's character for no longer being as fast as he used to be, and Sly lets it wash off in the way only a big star can. Jet Li is at the center of another bit of humor, based largely on his relatively small size (compared with the likes of Dolph Lundgren), but when the joke runs out of steam, it is simply dropped, one of many dangling loose ends in this shaggy dog of a film. *The Expendables* revisits memories of past action flicks and has much of the appeal of a bumper issue of some action star fan-zine. Not too serious, not too good, but with plenty of familiar faces and the occasional joke that can raise a smile. The film itself is certainly expendable, not to say disposable, but this hasn't stopped talk of a sequel.

FILM REVIEW

Don't forget to buy the album

Pop sensation Wang Lee-hom's directorial debut is more self-promotional campaign than movie magic

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Wang Lee-hom (王力宏) and Jay Chou (周杰倫) share much in common. Both are Mando-pop superstars, both created their signature sounds by fusing Chinese and Western music styles, and with Wang's directorial debut *Love in Disguise* (戀愛通告) hitting movie theaters in Taiwan and China this week, both have tested their talents in filmmaking.

The comparison doesn't end there. Both Chou and Wang started their first forays into directing with a subject they know best.

In his puppy-love flick *Secret* (不能說的秘密), Chou stars as a younger version of himself, a music major at Tamkang Secondary School (the Mando-pop king's alma mater).

Wang plays himself in *Love in Disguise*, a romantic comedy that tells the story of Du Minghan, a pop sensation who found fame at a tender age and leads a glitzy life filled with champagne-fueled parties and paparazzi.

Then he meets Song Xiaoping



Wang Lee-hom's onscreen chemistry with both his romantic interest, played by Liu Yifei, and his sidekick, played by Chen Han-dian, fizzles.

(played by China's Liu Yifei, 劉亦菲), a girl-next-door type college student and *guzheng* (古箏, Chinese zither) player at the Shanghai Conservatory.

Determined to get to know Song better, Du enrolls at the music school in disguise, dragging along with him his buddy, the guitar-playing Wei Zhibo (Taiwanese entertainer Chen Han-dian, 陳漢典).

The rest of the movie adheres to the formulaic and well-trodden romcom genre plotline: The two are attracted to each other, encounter obstacles to their budding relationship, but by the end wind up together as we always know they would.

In Wang's version, the hero saves the day and wins the girl's heart with a cheer-inducing show

of "chinked-out" music, a fusion style created by the ABT singer and songwriter who combines Chinese traditional music with hip-hop beats.

Like Chou was with *Secret*, for *Love in Disguise* Wang is credited as co-writer, director and actor, and was supported by a top-notch production crew, including internationally acclaimed cinematographer Mark Lee (李屏賓) and sound designer Tu Du-chih (杜鵑之).

But while Chou's *Secret*, albeit cliched and overly lovey-dovey at times, is a neatly produced piece of filmmaking in its own right, *Love in Disguise* resembles little more than an expensive self-publicity stunt in the guise of a film.

Everything about the story and its characters is lifeless, and the

film seems like it was tailor-made to show off Wang's considerable musical accomplishments.

In the movie, the Wang/Du duo save the school's music department from closure by reviving interest in traditional Chinese music with "chinked-out" tunes. Off screen, Wang's new album, *The 18 Martial Arts* (十八般武藝), is scheduled for release today, and many of its songs can be found on the movie.

The film's penchant for promotion reaches another level with the blatant product placement of hair-care and beauty brands that Wang endorses.

Veteran actress Joan Chen (陳沖) deserves a mention for striking a fine balance between caricature and comedy as Du's overbearing but loving agent.

And the star of the show, whose wooden performances in Ang Lee's (李安) *Lust, Caution* (色戒) and the Jackie Chan-produced film *Little Big Soldier* (大兵小將) were greeted with scorn, benefits from showing off his comic side, though the script often resorts to hackneyed jokes.

Love in Disguise does offer moments of genuine humor and delight when the boundary between what's real and what's not is deliberately crossed, leaving audiences amused over the fact that Wang is able to make fun of himself as one of the most hotly pursued stars in the Chinese-speaking world.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Amphetamine (安非他命)

Director Scud's (雲翔) interests were prominently on display in *Permanent Residence* (2009, 永久居留), with its self-indulgent homoerotic musings that span sexual awakening, unrequited love and musings on love and death. His mastery of the visual medium may have taken a step forward with *Amphetamine*, but so has the self-indulgence, which was described as "unbridled" in a *Taipei Times* review of *Permanent Residence*. In this newest work, the director makes references his previous work in a manner that clearly signal his aspirations as an auteur. The story of a successful finance executive (Thomas Price) and his passionate, doomed, infatuation with a drug addicted swimming instructor (Byron Pang), skirts the borders of gay porn, but had sufficient assurance to earn a nomination in the Panorama category of the 2010 Berlin International Film Festival. Extensive English-language material about the film is available at www.amphetaminemovie.com.



Close to You (近在咫尺)

A new film by Cheng Hsiao-tse (程孝澤), who scored a minor success with *Miao Miao* (渺渺) in 2008, *Close to You* takes the Asian romantic melodrama to new levels of improbability and contrived heartache. The cast of pretty-boy Eddie Peng (彭于晏) and Ming Dow (明道), pretending to be serious boxers, and a romantic interest involving a beautiful violinist, played by singer Amber Kuo (郭采潔), are sufficiently off-the-wall — even before you get involved in the narrative, which brings in amnesia, and prizefights set up to fulfill obligations to dying grandparents. *Close to You* is being touted as a box office rival to *Love You 10,000 Years* (愛你一萬年) released last week, but the fact that the two leading males glisten with sweat and wear boxing shorts while showing off their work at the gym is likely to constitute this film's main attraction.



Women Without Men (Zanan-e Bedun-e Mardan)

A visually sumptuous film by Shrin Neshat, a photographer making her debut as a filmmaker, *Women Without Men* looks at the interwoven lives of four women living in Iran against the backdrop of the CIA-backed coup of 1953. The film picked up the Silver Bear at the Venice Film Festival last year despite a general critical consensus that the much of the dialogue is too heavily didactic, but there has been almost universal acclaim for a filmmaking style that had directors such as Ang Lee (李安) lavishing praise on its acting and visual appeal. A story about women whose lives are made profoundly unhappy by men, *Women Without Men* has a strong feminist sensibility, but its powerful conceptual and visual appeal overcomes many narrative infelicities. In Persian with Chinese subtitles, but with enough visual appeal even to overcome this obstacle. Further information at www.womenwithoutmenfilm.com.



On the Path (Na Putu)

A film from Bosnia and Herzegovina by director Jasmila Zbanic, who came to prominence after winning the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2006 for *Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams*. *On the Path* tells the story of airline cabin attendant Luna (Zrinka Cvitecic) and boyfriend Amar (Leon Lucev), whose relationship comes under strain when Amar begins to drift into the hold of Wahhabi Islam. Set in Sarajevo, *On the Path* portrays a society at the crossroads of Western secularism and Islamic fundamentalism, enriching its conventional romantic melodrama with many issues of faith, freedom and identity.



Solanin

Carrying on from her roles in *Nana* (2000) and *Brass Knuckle Boys* (2008), Aoi Miyazaki is back as yet another cute-yet-feisty young Japanese woman who finds liberation for the daily grind, and a glimpse of true love, by joining a rock 'n' roll band. The story, based on a best-selling manga by Inio Asano, has good-looking leads, catchy tunes and the promise that our dreams do come true to give it appeal outside of a strictly Japanese audience. Solidly put together according to a tried-and-tested formula, *Solanin* offers no surprises, but is a perfectly fine example of its type.



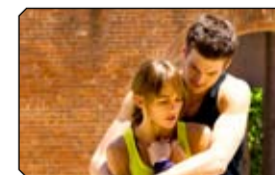
Still (Taii Hong)

Portmanteau horror flick from Thailand made up of four stories taken from actual news events and turned into supernatural shorts. The death of 61 in a nightclub, a ghost in a maximum security prison that supposedly led to a number of suicides, a body found in a water tank in an apartment building, and corpses hidden under the bed at a motel, are events that featured in the back pages of Thailand's press over the last few years. These have been worked into stories and loosely tied together, providing a showcase of current cliches of Thai horror. The topical references will probably be lost on non-Thai audiences, giving this film limited international appeal. Lots of blood, decomposing bodies and bug-eyed faces looming out of the darkness.



Step Up 3D

The venerable *Step Up* franchise, which got started back in 2006, is being brought to the silver screen in all its 3D glory in yet another story of good-looking guys and gals who love to dance. If you liked the recently released UK film *Street Dance 3D*, then *Step Up 3D* is likely to get your foot tapping, since it also features attractive bodies and slick dance sequences. Its use of 3D is said to be more effective than the British production. Walt Disney publicity material describes the film as: "the world's best hip-hop dancers in a high-stakes showdown that will change their lives forever." The cliches don't end there. But clunky acting and a script that may possibly be the "worst in history," according to one reviewer, don't really get in the way of the enjoyment, 'cause it's really all about the dance.



Morning Rock (盛夏的晨間搖滾 — 盧廣仲電影音樂會)

A behind-the-scenes look at the story behind the creation of Crowl Lu's (盧廣仲) hugely successful release of *Seven Days* (七天) followed by an actual concert with Lu in all his live 3D glory. This combined film and performance will take place at 10am today, tomorrow and Sunday at the IN89 (華華) cinema at 89, Wuchang St, Taipei City (台北市武昌街89號). Tickets cost NT\$499. The event will run for 90 minutes, with the film running 50 minutes and the concert 40 minutes.



Film Notes

LOVE IN DISGUISE
戀愛通告

DIRECTED BY:
WANG LEE-HOM (王力宏)

STARRING:
WANG LEE-HOM (王力宏)
AS DU MINGHAN,
LIU YIFEI (劉亦菲) AS SONG XIAOQING,
JOAN CHEN (陳沖) AS JOAN, CHEN HAN-DIAN (陳漢典) AS WEI ZHIBO

RUNNING TIME:
98 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
IN MANDARIN WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY