

FILM REVIEW

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Film Notes

THE GIRL WHO PLAYED WITH FIRE (FLICKAN SOM LEKTE MED ELDEN)

DIRECTED BY:
DANIEL ALFREDSONSTARRING:
NOOMI RAPACE (LISBETH SALANDER),
MICHAEL NYQVIST (MIKAEL
BLOMKVIST), LENA ENDRE (ERIKA
BERGER), SOFIA LEDARP (MALIN
ERIKSON), MICKÉ SPREITZ (RONALD
NIEDERMANN), GEORGI STAYKOV
(ALEXANDER ZALACHENKO)RUNNING TIME:
129 MINUTESLANGUAGE:
SWEDISH WITH CHINESE SUBTITLESTAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

PHOTOS COURTESY OF IFLM

Slash and burn

The plot thickens in the newest cinematic outing of Stieg Larsson's 'Millennium' trilogy, with Lisbeth Salander battling accusations of murder

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

In the second installment of the cinematic adaptation of Stieg Larsson's best-selling *Millennium* trilogy, which opens today, audiences are expected to catch up pretty quickly with events that took place in preceding installment *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, but this proviso is part of the appeal of this hard-edged series of thrillers.

Although the direction has changed hands, with Daniel Alfredson taking over responsibilities from Niels Arden Oplev, there is the same fierce energy about the filmmaking, which requires audiences to pay attention and keep up. While there is much wrong with *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, this expectation of engagement, and the respect for the viewers that it conveys, raises the film well above the level of many brasher and brighter Hollywood products.

For audiences who have not engaged with the character of Lisbeth Salander (once again gloriously realized by Noomi Rapace), the first 15 minutes of the movie are like diving into freezing water, and it is to director Alfredson's credit that he does not leave the viewer floundering, as the action very quickly

pulls clear of the initial confusion. There is plenty of story in *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, but the central relationship that made *Dragon Tattoo* such a pleasure is attenuated, with Salander and her sometime lover and confidant Mikael Blomkvist (Michael Nyqvist) only meeting in the final moments of the film. For the rest of the time, they interact through cyberspace, often wordlessly.

It must be said at this point, for those unfamiliar with the series, that Salander is not a woman who wants to be found, even by those she holds most dear. She lives a hidden life, engaging with the world online. This second installment sharpens the contrast between her arm's-length contact with society, and the sexually violent and physical background that is central to her existence. This is a story that provides us with clues to Salander's shy, needy and sometimes vicious personality.

There is far too much backstory to make even a cursory synopsis much use, so suffice to say that *The Girl Who Plays With Fire* sees Blomkvist and the *Millennium* magazine, of which he is an editor, engaged with a

young investigative journalist in uncovering a ring of people traffickers. The head of this ring is linked to Salander, who becomes the scapegoat for a series of bloody killings. Only by working together can Blomkvist get the story and Salander stay clear of the law.

Rapace has created a splendid character in Salander, who is a bewildering mixture of anger, fear, vulnerability, smarts and formidable memories. There are moments of surprising intimacy, one of the most effective being a scene that has Rapace doing nothing more than sitting in a car looking at her smart phone.

In a desperate search for Salander, Blomkvist breaks into her house, and sets off her alarm in the process. The CCTV at her home links to her phone and Salander sees her old friend, who until then she has not quite trusted enough to contact directly, coming through her front door. As Blomkvist awaits the sirens, Salander disengages the alarm, wordlessly granting him access. There is an intimacy to her action, tenderness to a friend; she sees him only through a blurry on-screen image transmitted over a wireless network. They do not talk, but in deactivating the alarm,

she gives him access to herself.

This is a standout moment in what is otherwise a fairly standard thriller, one that does not quite pack the atmospheric power of the previous installment. The mood of hidden terror that lingers on from the cruelties of the Cold War, an important theme in *Dragon Tattoo*, remains, filling the story with a sense of old, dirty and deformed secrets hidden beneath the glossy surfaces of modern life. There is a sense that, despite all the absurdities of the story, the characters inhabit something akin to the real world, and not some one-dimensional cinematic fantasyland.

An American production of *Dragon Tattoo* is scheduled for next year, directed by David Fincher and with Daniel Craig playing Blomkvist. It looks to be a solid set up, but there have been too many previous examples of Hollywood eviscerating European films in its frenzied search for mass-market appeal. With thoughts of this future visitation, it is probably worth catching the Swedish production before it is buried under the media hype that will undoubtedly attend the release of the US version.

FILM REVIEW

Traveling man with few words and a big gun

George Clooney composes an artful variation on a familiar theme of the strong, silent archetype in 'The American'

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

"You have the hands of a craftsman, not an artist," says a friendly village priest (Paolo Bonacelli) to an American expatriate whose identity is ambiguous but whose face is recognizable to the rest of us as George Clooney's. This fellow, temporarily assuming the name Edward, having been Jack before, but known to two different women as Mr. Butterfly, has showed up in a picturesque town in Abruzzo, a mountainous region east of Rome, where he's pretending to be a photographer. His actual profession, though never quite specified, is more malevolent, and he is currently working on a commission to supply a sexy assassin (Thekla Reuten) with a custom-made weapon.

A good deal of *The American*, directed by Anton Corbijn (adapted from a script by Rowan Joffe (adapted from the novel *A Very Private Gentleman*, by Martin Booth)), is devoted to the patient examination of Mr. Butterfly at work. He plies his trade with meticulous care, weighing, measuring, disassembling and tweaking his special gun with artisanal devotion. And the virtues of the film itself are those of craft rather than art. Its precision is impressive and fussy rather than invigorating. It is a reasonably skillful exercise in genre and style, a well-made vessel containing nothing

in particular, though some of its features — European setting, slow pacing, full-frontal female nudity — are more evocative of the art house than of the multiplex.

Corbijn, a photographer who turned to filmmaking with *Control*, his moody and measured biography of Ian Curtis, lead singer of the Manchester post-punk band Joy Division, has an eye for natural beauty and a practiced sense of composition. Frame by frame — eagle-eye views of red-tile roofs and glimpses down narrow stone passageways; sex scenes and shots of Clooney glumly drinking coffee — *The American* is never less than gorgeous. And the oblique approach it takes to what is a fairly standard plot creates a mood of suspense quickened by the accelerated heartbeat of Herbert Gronemeyer's unobtrusive music.

A quiet, brooding sense of menace settles in right at the beginning, which finds Clooney, his silver hair complemented by a snowy beard, rusticating in the snowy Swedish countryside. His idyll is disrupted by homicide, and with the help of a sinister gentleman named Pavel (Johan Leysen), our newly clean-shaven American settles in Italy.

In addition to the priest, he befriends Clara, a prostitute — played by an actress with the splendidly oxymoronic name



George Clooney shoots from the hip.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

Violante Placido — who is so stirred by his bedroom prowess that she stops charging him and asks him out for dinner instead. (Some guys get all the breaks.) Meanwhile his business dealings with his client carry a sexual undercurrent that the American may or may not notice.

It is, in general, hard to fathom what he sees or thinks, which is both the point and a bit of a problem. Jack, or Edward, or Butterfly (he's called that because of a tattoo between his shoulder blades and also because of a more mysterious totemic connection to the insect) is a familiar enough movie type. He's the lone gunslinger, the masterless samurai, the silent killer whose professional life exacts a toll on his spirit. He wants to leave behind his life of violence and drifting — "I'm out," he says at one point, in case

we were wondering — and to find the kind of human connection that his temperament and his job have denied him up to now.

This kind of character tends to be a man of few words: Clint Eastwood, Steve McQueen, Robert Redford in the 1970s, Alan Ladd in *Shane*. Clooney's gravelly whisper and diffident, ironical air make him a natural heir to the tradition, and many of his roles — in *Syriana*, in *Michael Clayton* and even last year in *Up in the Air* — are variations on the strong, silent archetype. *The American*, filtering out any mention of the character's history and suppressing all but the tiniest indications of emotion, tries to strip the man to his essence.

But there is not quite enough there: The still waters run very cool but not terribly deep, and *The*

Film Notes

THE AMERICAN

DIRECTED BY:
ANTON CORBIJNSTARRING:
GEORGE CLOONEY (JACK/EDWARD),
THEKLA REUTEN (MATHILDE), PAOLO
BONA-CELLI (FATHER BENEDETTO),
VIOLANTE PLACIDO (CLARA), JOHAN
LEYSEN (PAVEL)RUNNING TIME:
105 MINUTESTAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

American falls back into a view of its protagonist that is ultimately more sentimental than unsettling or intriguing. Clooney, shorn of his mischief and charm, does not possess the resources to suggest the state of existential torment that are crucial to the logic of his character. Instead he looks bored, intermittently anxious and sometimes almost excited. At least he seems to appreciate the beauty of the scenery, human and otherwise. It's hard not to when so little else is going on.

Fantome, Ou Es-Tu? (酷馬)

Fantome, Ou Es-Tu? (酷馬) begins with Cool-ma, a teenage marathon runner, accidentally being killed in a gang fight. His spirit lingers on, though, worried that no one will take care of his widowed mother, and the only person able to see the apparition is Cool-ma's slayer, Tanguo, a restless tomboy whose rich parents have little time for her. The two become friends, and Tanguo takes Cool-ma's place on the marathon team. With a 30-year career in film and television drama under her belt, female director Wang Shau-di (王小蝶) is noted for exploring humanity through melodrama. As in her previous works, emotions take precedence over aesthetics and style in *Fantome, Ou Es-Tu?* Sean Huang (黃遠), who plays Cool-ma, and Jin Cheng (鄭麗霞), cast as Tanguo, are worth a mention for their debut efforts as actors. But the star of the film is renowned choreographer and dancer Ku Min-shen (古名伸), who gives a powerful and memorable performance as a mother gone mad after losing her only child.



Adventure of the King (龍鳳店)

This action comedy starring Hong Kong mega-star Richie Ren (任賢齊) and Taiwan's very own Barbie Hsu (徐熙媛), otherwise known as Big S (大S), has been slated by the Chinese-language media as a soulless retreat of a topic that has been well covered in cinema, and to add insult to injury, it deploys old jokes and stale comic action. The film draws inspiration from the legends surrounding the fondness of the Ming Dynasty emperor Zhengde (正德皇帝) for life on the streets. In one of these ventures he gets separated from his retinue, conveniently loses his memory, and is helped by a beautiful woman who runs an unsuccessful restaurant. A combination of their talents sees her fortunes turn around, but also brings Zhengde to the attention of those who would rather keep the emperor out of the way for good. Big S puts in a solid performance, but only really enters the story during the second hour, which is too late to save the film. There is speculation that *Adventure of the King* might aspire to being the worst Chinese film of this year, which is no small achievement.



About Her Brother (Ototo)

A film by director Yoji Yamada, who brought us the *Tora-san* movies and in later life redefined the samurai movie with such classics as the *Fujisawa* trilogy. Yamada has proven himself a master of exploring complex historical relationships on a human scale, and has a particularly fine command of Japan's multifaceted transition from tradition to modernity. His skill with female characters has also been widely praised. *About Her Brother* focuses on three women from three generations, a wedding ceremony and a younger brother who upsets the apple cart of propriety with his drunkenness and childish pranks, but finds he can always return to the protection of his sister. When the younger brother develops lung cancer and saddles his sister with huge gambling debts, Yamada gets serious with tugging at the heartstrings.



Devil

A film "from the mind of M. Night Shyamalan," according to the official trailer, may just make you thankful that at least it is not actually directed by the embattled auteur and perpetrator of *The Last Airbender*. Directed by Drew and John Erick Dowdle, the story has five people trapped in an elevator in one of those super high-tech buildings. But one of the occupants isn't what he, or she, appears to be. So guess what? Well, the title is a bit of a giveaway, but M. Night Shyamalan can usually be relied upon to insert a heavy load of New Age mystification into the proceedings, and an inexplicable twist at the end.



Ong Bak 3

Muay Thai meets some seriously messed up mythology and the prodigious martial arts and stunt choreography talents of Tony Jaa in this third installment of the Ong Bak saga. *Ong Bak 3* is actually the second prequel to the first film *Ong-Bak: Muay Thai Warrior* released in 2003, which has since garnered a solid cult audience that extends well beyond Thailand. The violence is bloody, the plot is convoluted in the extreme, and an undercurrent of pop Buddhist cosmology and anti-authoritarian sentiment runs through the film, giving it some semblance of depth. *Ong Bak 3* picks up from the cliffhanger ending of *Ong Bak 2*, which might make it difficult to follow if you aren't up on all the details of the story, but the action is probably worth watching for its own sake (There is some radical stunt work featuring elephants). This installment pits Jaa against fellow martial arts sensation Dan Chupong, who plays a supernatural warrior.



Dancing Dreams

A real treat for lovers of dance, this German documentary takes a look at a recent project by the late Pina Bausch, one of the most influential figures in contemporary dance, who selected 40 students from across Germany, many of whom had never even heard of her, and put them through an intense 10-month rehearsal for the production of *Contact Zone* (Kontaktthof). The dance deals with the search for love and tenderness, and was intended to be a particular challenge for the young dancers participating in the project. The film was a sensation at this year's Berlin Film Festival and serves as a fitting elegy for Bausch, who died last year.

