

Toronto 2007

By Brandon Wee

Fall 2007 Issue of KINEMA

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2007

With a festival as big as Toronto's, pinning down a general theme about its line-up each year would seem to defy its promise of something-for-everyone, as this year's slate of 349 films from 55 countries showed. Although larger media outlets named discernible themes among the festival's subsections anyway - "frustrated youth" for one; "war in Iraq and global terrorism" for another, the most engaging films this year were apt to be foremost of all, engaging and well-told stories. Here are ten examples:

***4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Cristian Mungiu, Romania 2007)**

The waning period of the Ceausescu regime sets the stage for a young woman's labours to arrange a back-alley abortion for her college roommate. Although the illegality of the undertaking furnishes much of the plot's intrigue, the film's gravitas owes much to Mungiu's calibrated direction, which eschews reactionary drama, editing, and music for a spartan and clinical palette. The story's political backdrop isn't of central concern, but its significance nevertheless informs several critical moments: the hunt for a hotel room, negotiations with the abortionist, and a casual dinner party - surely the film's most revealing scene.

***Beyond The Years* (Im Kwon-taek, South Korea 2007)**

Adapted from the novel, *The Wanderer of Seonhak-dong* by Lee Cheong-joon, Im's one-hundredth film sees Oh Jung-hae reprising her role as the long-suffering daughter from her debut in Im's *Sopyonje* (1993). It's a lovely reinterpretation of the same tale, told from a man's reminiscence: how he had fled his father's punishing instruction of the *pansori* as a boy and sacrificed the affection he had for his stepsister; his return years later to consummate this love opens this story. Unlike *Sopyonje's* coup at the South Korean box office 14 years ago, *Beyond The Years* has regrettably failed to level the honour.

***Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* (Hana Makhmalbaf, Iran 2007)**

As with her elder sister, Samira's *The Apple* (1998), Hana Makhmalbaf's own debut feature boasts a similar precocity. Written by her mother, director Marziyeh Meshkini, the story is about a young Afghan village girl who learns to survive under patriarchal rule. Employing a realist style, and with imagery steeped in indignation at Afghanistan's political realities, the youngest Makhmalbaf also teases remarkable performances from her young leads (Nikbakht Noruz in particular), all of which sustain the film's charm. The fable-like title refers to the two colossal statues of Buddha in central Afghanistan, which the Taliban destroyed in 2001.

***The Exodus* (Pang Ho-cheung, Hong Kong/China 2007)**

To whet the appetite for Pang's latest film, the lesser said, the better - although a whiff of what's being served is necessary. Simon Yam plays a guileless veteran cop who dismisses the defence of a male voyeur caught in a female washroom. But when the suspect changes his plea to "guilty" the next day, he becomes convinced a private investigation is necessary. Pang, who has regularly used black humour as a seasoning to succulent effect, marinates *The Exodus* the same way, although he's admittedly allowed this dish to over-simmer. As such, many will find the recipe strictly an acquired taste.

***It's a Free World...* (Ken Loach, UK/Italy/Germany/Spain 2007)**

The prospects of winning and losing in a globalized world anchor Loach's contemporary tale of an ambitious single mother who, along with her best pal, sets up a recruitment agency to act as an intermediary between her business contacts and London's growing pool of illegal labour. Sounding cautionary alarm, the film advocates that greed can only advance a vicious circle - especially, according to Loach, when "abuse is built into the system." In her debut film role, Kierston Wareing is smartly cast as a woman naive enough to believe she can strike a fortune while doing favours for those less fortunate.

***Lust, Caution* (Ang Lee, Taiwan 2007)**

Considered by some as tepid and overlong, *Lust, Caution* is anything but. Its thrilling espionage, subtle

political subtext and intriguing denouement aside, Lee's adaptation of Eileen Chang's eponymous short story also works as captivating tragedy. And for the puzzling few convinced there's too little lust, at least two things must be considered in tandem: one, the sex between the characters played by Tony Leung and Tang Wei isn't merely recreational (for too much politics underscore each heave and thrust); and two, by mainstream standards, both the political and physical portrayals of sex are remarkably bold (even in *that* brief comical moment).

***No Country For Old Men* (Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, USA 2007)**

A cross between entertaining thriller and existentialist drama, the Coens' latest film, adapted from a Cormac McCarthy novel, is also strictly up their thematic alley, involving a central character whose humdrum life spirals out of control when he finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time - and then chooses to do the wrong thing. As the hunted, Josh Brolin's only mistake is to claim a bag of cash at the scene of a drug deal massacre. As the hunter out for Brolin's blood, Javier Bardem glides stealthily along his beaten track with decisive malevolence; if looks could kill, he wouldn't need a cattle gun.

***Sad Vacation* (Aoyama Shinji, Japan 2007)**

In Aoyama Shinji's topographical portrait of a man's repressed state of mind, Tadanobu Asano plays Kenji, a diligent and compassionate drifter whose bottled-up affliction from a traumatic childhood slowly comes undone during a chance encounter with his mother who abandoned him years ago. Although Kenji is instinctively drawn to his long-lost parent, he's equally repulsed by her easy and nonchalant acceptance of his presence in her household, where she helps run a business that employs drifters like him. Subdued but compelling, *Sad Vacation's* intricate narrative proves a happy challenge to navigate.

***September* (Peter Carstairs, Australia 2007)**

September's tale unfolds in the wheat belt of Western Australia in the late 60s, a time when indigenous Australians were just becoming recognized as citizens after a census referendum. Two adolescent boys find their friendship strained when labour tensions erupt between their families, one of which is in the employ of the other. Though the theme of fraternal bond in crisis is somewhat clichéd, with several stock devices tossed around to drive the point home, Carstairs' overall portrayal is one of subtlety and quietude. The resulting exposition radiates evocative charm - admirable for a feature debut.

***Le voyage du Ballon Rouge* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, France 2007)**

Like *Café Lumière*, nothing happens in *Le voyage du Ballon Rouge* - that is, no conventional plot is discernible. Characters coast along, their quotidian rituals presented as curious preoccupations which Hou captures with his elegant pans and tilts, wherein the lesser their focus, the greater their detail. The resultant vista of Parisian life is one of contrast and mutuality: a Taiwanese film student serenely charmed by French culture is au pair to the son of an uptight French mother working as a voice artist for a Chinese puppetry troupe. Given the Musée d'Orsay's commission of the film, its strong impressionist flavour is probably no coincidence.

Author Information

Brandon WEE lives in Toronto. He has written for *Asia Pacific Arts* (Los Angeles), *Cineaste* (New York), *Cinema Scope* (Toronto), *Ricepaper* (Vancouver), and *Senses of Cinema* (Melbourne).