

Asian Film Festival, Florence Gould Hall

Alienation and Celebration of the Asian Experience

BY MARK HALL AMITIN



Once again Florence Gould Hall, at 55-E. 59th St., will house the Asian Cine Vision's Festival. This year 49 films by Asian filmmakers will be shown from all over Asia and North America. The range, from documentary to comedy, is vast, and the scope of content is as broad as the territories covered. A number of these films have already received awards at other festivals, and several will be released for commercial runs following the festival screenings.

Themes of the festival are the dilemmas of sexuality, alienation and the old world versus the new, trying to salvage values from the simplicity of an older way of life. These changes rain down a certain psychological

havoc and puncture the soul, which longs for a deeper sense of nature, humanity and continuity.

One can only give a sample of the many films, but here are some highlights:



Masato Harada's *Painted Desert* (Japan), part of the Asian Film Festival runs July 16.

Kicking off the festival are two winners of the prestigious Golden Bear Award of the Berlin Festival: *The Wedding Banquet* (Taiwan/USA) by Ang Lee and Xie Fei's *The Woman from the Lake of Scented Souls* (China). *The Wedding Banquet* takes place in New York and is a witty, touching modern story of a young Taiwanese, Wai-Tung (Winston Chao), settled into a life with his lover (Mitchell Lichtenstein) of five years. His parents back home keep trying to match him up with the right woman. Finally, to assuage their pressures, he announces his engagement to a beautiful mainland Chinese girl (May Chin) who desperately needs a green card to stave off deportation. His parents arrive to arrange for a giant wedding, which he feels he must go through with. The ruse has its poignant and hysterical moments. Eventually, truth will out, and the dénouement leaves us with a feeling of hope. This is as bright and up-to-the-minute as any New York film could possibly be.

Southern Winds (Indonesia/Japan/Thailand/Philippines) is four shorter films of about 20 to 30 minutes apiece linked by the common theme of new world/old world. Each is a small classic and first-class in its production values, acting and story. With striking cinematography and

touching portrayals, each reveals a connection to the village, innocence and youth, and its transposition to the harshness of modern life. In each there is the hope of redemption—but no promises.

Rebels of the Neon God (Taiwan) is a story of teens alienated from self and family, searching for ways to connect to something more meaningful. It represents the clearest of the problems we ourselves face of thingness versus humanity, materialism against heart. Director-writer Tsai Ming-liang adopts a distancing technique that never allows us to get inside any of the characters. We are forced to merely observe their behavior and draw our own conclusions. Though not a pretty picture, we don't really feel sorry for them. We do know, however, that the answers to their problems lie somewhere outside the purview of their exigencies.

Painted Desert (Japan), directed by Masato Harada, is a modern American bicultural Western-cum-gangster-romance. It is riveting, authentic and extremely well done. Just when we think we know what's going on, there's a new twist. Perhaps this is more the wave of future filmmaking than we might imagine. The actors are singularly strong and appealing. It is a cross-cultural

mélange from the respected American character actor James Gammon as the irascible gangster with a heart, to the touching Nobu McCarthy as a discarded Tokyo Rose running a nearly deserted cafe in the midst of a desert. The young and handsome Kazuya Kimura appears with no explanation to gum up the works, and we find ourselves in the middle of a gang war in the tumbleweeds. While the landscape is arid, the performances and photography are first-rate and the story obtusely riveting.

Dark Sun; Bright Shade (Canada) an hourlong film with some spectacular experimental techniques, written, directed and produced by Kwoi K. Gin, explores the background of a young mainland Chinese student, Kai, studying in Vancouver during the time of confrontations in Tian An Men Square in 1989 and his life of freedom and longing for a part in his own destiny. This is juxtaposed with his friendship with a Canadian-born Chinese, Paul, whose own rebellion against his traditional roots causes the two of them to each confront what is important in their lives. Their sexual relationship further complicates the situation, while Kai is visited by a spiritual shaman that draws him to decide to return home whatever the outcome might bring. It is a sensual, powerful, modernist tale of two cultures and two lives and their confrontation with the same reality but with equally different conclusions.

My Glorious Paradise (China/USA), a half-hour short shot in China by Jule Gilfillan, reflects the exploits of two pre-adolescent boys run amok during the anything but halcyon days of the Cultural Revolution, when, without authority or supervision, they nearly burn down their house, border on starvation against the background of shouted slogans, parents sent off to the countryside for rehabilitation, and denunciations of capitalist roaders.

Oddly enough, it's cute and quaint, like the introduction to what should be a full-length movie that tells us what happens next.

There are dozens more films, all of which hold promise and excitement, including, the Philippino historical drama *Bayani The Patriots, From Hollywood to Hanoi*, the study of a Vietnamese woman in America; *Glamazon A Different Kind of Woman*, a docudrama on the transsexual Barbara LeMay; and *The Legend of Fong Sai-Yuk*; from Hong Kong, a kung fu saga on the lines of *Once Upon a Time in China*. The festival runs from July 16 to 25. For more information call 885-8885.

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