

Sneak preview behind bamboo curtain

by Ken Hui

The National Film Theatre (NFT) is presenting a Chinese cinema film retrospective in December. "It is a rare opportunity for NFT to present these films from the People's Republic of China (PRC). They have never been shown in Edmonton before," said Linda T. Callaghan.

Callaghan, the president of NFT, has been a member of the NFT Board of Directors for the past two years. "We usually run four movies a month, but because of their unique nature, we've decided to bring six PRC films altogether."

As to the question whether Chinese cinema is of an inferior quality, Callaghan said, "We Edmontonians have never seen any films from PRC and it is very hard to compare with Canadian movies. Presumably these films are organized and selected in a way that they should be of satisfactory quality."

Callaghan is not familiar with ethnic theatres in Chinatown and the answer she offers to the question of possible duplication is "I presume these films have never been shown in Edmonton." This reporter later discovered that only commercial films are shown at the Chinatown theatres.

The NFT was careful to choose appropriate films. "There were 30 Chinese films available and the programming committee selected six films which have English subtitles. I was unfortunately not on the programming committee. The committee is made up of people with in-depth knowledge about the film industry and these people are indeed very interested in films. The programming committee meets once a month and it is basically a brainstorming session, selecting movies which fall within our guidelines," said Callaghan.

The NFT has been presenting films of different cinematic genres and nationalities. The programme in January will include a selection of international movies, mainly from Europe.

The NFT plays a unique role in enriching cultural life in Edmonton. "We have set guidelines for showing movies which nor-

mally are not seen in mainstream theatres. These films are usually of quiet quality and thus may not be recognized by other theatres. Excellent films may not be commercial enough to be shown elsewhere. As for foreign films, our films are all in English subtitle, but not dumb," said Callaghan.

Callaghan and the NFT are pursuing specific goals this year. "We would like to

increase public awareness of our presence and the films available for them. We will have some special events in the spring and will bring a package of films that are of great interest," said Callaghan.

Callaghan admits that the NFT is facing difficulties. "We have just gotten out of debt problems. We have to re-structure our organization and cannot afford to show films as often as before. We've cut the scope of our presentation: we used to have two screenings, five times a week, but now we can only offer two screenings once a week," said Callaghan.

As to the future, Callaghan said, "Hopefully, we will build up our audience large enough to run the programs."

The films to be shown at the Roxy Theatre are: *In the Wild Mountains*, Dec. 3; *Anxious To Return*, Dec. 4; *Border Town*, Dec. 10; *Under the Bridge*, Dec. 11; *The Goddess*, Dec. 17; *New Year's Sacrifice*, Dec. 18.

In the Wild Mountains
NFT
Roxy Theatre

review by Ken Hui

Running the gamut from lust to economics, *In the Wild Mountains* recounts the joys and sorrows of the Chinese peasant through a simple, yet touching story. This film epitomizes the breakthroughs occurring in Chinese cinema. The Chinese characters are no longer subordinate Maoist puritans and propagandists; rather, they are complete human beings with instincts and emotions.

Set in the rural mountains of China, the film focuses on Huihui and his wife Guilan, peasant farmers. A conformist, Huihui is skeptical of the revival of private enterprise and strives to live as his forefathers did for generations. Huihui's younger brother, Hehe is a soldier who has witnessed the prosperity in the world outside. Returning to his home village, Hehe opens a small business, the only one in the village. While Quirong, Hehe's ex-lover, opposes his capitalistic endeavours, Guilan, Huihui's wife, is supportive. Hehe finally succeeds, however Huihui, suspicious of Guilan's intentions, divorces her and marries Quirong. As the film ends, two new families are established; that of Huihui and Quirong who will live in poverty, and that of Hehe and Guilan who are wealthy.

Chinese cinema has come a long way. The characters are being allowed a sexual

dimension. The Chinese peasants in the film are seen to appreciate the beauty of the opposite sex, something long ignored. In one scene, a person overlooks Quirong's breasts as she feeds her child. In another scene, Guilan approaches her husband Huihui at bedtime, but finds that her husband has fallen asleep after a hard day's work. Pre-marital sex is also portrayed. These depictions are not vehicles for eroticism and pornography, but are artistic endeavours to establish the genuine humanity of the Chinese characters. Instincts and desires are aspects of humanity which have long been ignored in Chinese cinema. Sexuality may be portrayed very subtly in this film, but it is at least not avoided.

For western audiences, *In the Wild Mountains* is a unique visual and audio experience. The technical refinement in cinematography, especially in the use of colour, successfully delineates the peasants' sorrow. The evocative use of wild landscape and lyrical handling of beautiful scenery eliminates the extended dialogue which characterized previous Chinese cinema. Another remarkable feature in the film is the presence of folklore, a Chinese music form. The universality of music breaks through language barrier.

Feminism also survives in the movie. Guibears no shame in her infertility although childbearing is considered to be a female's obligation in the peasants' world. Guilan also defends herself against suspicions of adultery by the neighbourhood when she insists on volunteering in Hehe's business. Yet Guilan has to escape from social pressure which she can no longer endure at the end. Her married life with Huihui ends up in jeopardy.

The regressive aspects of human nature are not hidden in the movie. Those who criticize Hehe initially flatter him when he gets rich in the hope of gaining benefit. The peasants may be primitive in their rituals, but they transcend their crudity through action creating personalities who are able to laugh at their own vulgarity. While Hehe suffers in his search for fortune, he retains a profound nobility by not humiliating himself before the ignorant peasants and the arrogant townpeople. Should there be any vulgarity among the characters, these are mere expressions of fleeting emotions.

Unlike Maoist cinema, *In the Wild Mountains* is aware of the disastrous effect that didactic films can have on the box office. It highlights social issues, but explores them in a touching humane manner. While the cinematography and acting are occasionally stilted, the story is told in such human terms that it cannot help but have an appeal.



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