

# REVIEWS

## At the End of Daybreak thrills filmgoers



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The mother laughs hysterically at us as if we have been fooled all along: “my son would never call.”

Thus climaxes Yuhang Ho’s surrealistic family psychological drama “At the End of Daybreak” (or “Sham moh”), which recently showed at the Anaheim International Film Festival.

Ho, best known for his critically acclaimed “Rain Dogs” (2006), is one of the best new talents in Malaysian/Hong Kong independent cinema. His works, like “Min” (2003) and “Sanctuary” (2004), focus on modern Malaysian life, contrasting villages and city centers, although the best of his works also dwell on the unexpected, much as “At the End of Daybreak” does.

The story begins with a love affair between a motorcycle-riding 23-year-old named Tuck (Tien You Chui) and a 15-year-old high school student named Ying (Meng Hui Ng). Ying’s mother discovers her use of contraception and demands to know who the boy is. Her family threatens to sue Tuck and put him in jail for statutory rape. Distraught, Tuck’s mother asks her ex-husband for money, but after the money is transferred to Ying’s family, they still want to pursue legal action.

At this point, the story turns from family drama to crime mystery. Tuck invites Ying and her friend to go out to the forest, where he accidentally kills Ying. Although Tuck’s friends cover up for him by choking the other girl, he later tries to commit suicide.

Ho’s masterful use of angular perspectives can best be seen as Tuck tries to get back on his bike. The film is composed mostly of wide and medium shots. During Tuck’s attempt to get back on the bike, we look upon the scene as if we are watching from the moon. Moreover, the moon is eclipsed in this scene as if the audience is being fooled.

Tien You Chui’s performance is understated, although at certain moments his inability to heighten his emotions seems detrimental. Tien manages some tears, but there are no close ups of his emotions. His lack of emotion can sometimes contribute to the film’s ambiguity.

The female characters are the strengths of this film. Meng Hui Ng is perfectly conniving as the youthful and opportunistic Ying. Meng does a perfect impression of a thief, showing no emotion. She puts on a dress in the store, looks at herself in the mirror, and walks away nonchalantly, as if she has done it a million times.

The best performance comes from Kara Hui, who plays Tuck’s alcoholic mother. Hui’s emotions are raw, but she also does a great job of showing the poverty the family endures.



Photo courtesy of Yellow Cinema

## A must-see movie? You be the Judge

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A cute puppy being petted during dinner will not save director Jie Liu’s 2009 Chinese thriller “Judge,” shown at the 2010 Anaheim Film Festival, from its confusing plot. “Judge” is a movie centered on the male character Tian (Dahong Ni). As the name of the film suggests, Tian is a senior Chinese judge.

The movie follows Tian’s struggles over convicting a criminal, Qiu Wu, to death or granting him mercy for his crime of stealing two cars. In addition, there are vested interests Tian must deal with, such as a rich businessman who would like Wu dead so that he may have his kidney for a transplant, and Qiu’s family who obviously wish to keep him alive.

Although it seems straight forward, the storyline digresses numerous times. For instance, subplots such as Tian’s relationship with his traumatized wife who has not fully recovered from their daughter’s recent death only serve to distract the audience from the main plot. These elements only seem to detract from the main story, as the audience never understands the purpose of these scenes.

In addition, more confusion results from the difficulty of understanding why certain characters act the way they do in various situations. For

instance, why does Wu refuse to eat and sleep in jail, or do anything for that matter? It is impossible to understand. Opening the characters’ minds to reveal what they were thinking when they performed certain actions would have helped make the plot more comprehensible and not make audience members wonder what they watched.

To present the scenes, a dark atmosphere was created with many instances of silence and characters awkwardly staring at each other. To the credit of the director, this was accomplished successfully. The suspense made it essentially impossible to tell until the very end whether Qiu Wu would actually be saved or forsaken. This appropriately added to the movie’s plot and made you at least wonder what would happen. In “Judge”, silence is truly golden, allowing the tension to continuously build up until the fateful climax.

If you want a film to contemplate for the next month—try to figure out the characters’ motivations for their actions—then “Judge” is an excellent film. For casual film-viewers, it can still be an enjoyable movie to watch. Just don’t expect to fully understand exactly what is going on without some serious time in the shower or the toilet or wherever you have your epiphanies.

The scene in which the mother cuts Tuck’s hair as he complains about his life is masterful, as the mother is shown to be infinitely compassionate, patient, and loving to her son. We understand why, at the end, Hui looks directly at the audience, laughs, and tells us that we’ve been fooled—she understands her son so well.

Yuhang Ho’s recreation of a murder mystery in “At the End of Daybreak” takes us from a family drama to a surrealist probe of the human psyche. As such, it is a genre-changing piece that should not be missed.