52nd Sydney Film Festival

A generally disappointing selection

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This is the first in a series of articles on the Sydney Film Festival, held over the period June 10-25, 2005.

The 52nd Sydney Film Festival saw a reduction in the number of movies screened—down from over 250 on previous occasions to 170—and the introduction of other measures to reduce costs in an attempt to maintain the festival's economic viability. While organisers have claimed an increase in the number of sell-out screenings, the event is struggling and has recorded financial losses for the past three years in a row. Conversely, the forthcoming Melbourne Film Festival appears to be expanding every year with over 400 films, scores of international guests and various side events.

Market pressures on the Sydney festival are obviously real—basic operating costs in Australia's most expensive city have dramatically escalated over the past decade; the subscriber base is declining, and is predominantly middle-aged; and there is increased competition from German, Italian, Spanish and Greek film festivals now being held in the city. These weekend or weeklong national festivals, which are assisted by their respective governments and expatriate businesses, are attracting significant audiences and provide other opportunities to see foreign films.

Another debilitating factor is the dearth of eloquent and deeply engaging contemporary work. This is a broader and more complex problem, which will not be surmounted easily. But how festival organisers respond is crucial. They can try to create better conditions to overcome the difficulties or exacerbate them with pragmatic, short-term solutions.

While Sydney Film Festival organisers are maintaining the annual event—an achievement in itself—there has been a strong tendency over the past few years to uncritically embrace "market wisdom" on cost-cutting, revenue raising and attracting larger and younger audiences.

The 2005 festival, for instance, included a collection of mindless Hong Kong action films, esoteric rock movies to celebrate 50 years of pop musicals and a large number of over-hyped, but generally worthless, "independent" features pitched at the so-called "youth demographic".

Another problem was that too many of the films had already been selected for release in local cinemas—some of them within days of the event concluding. This arrangement obviously provided valuable pre-publicity for local distributors and cinema chains, but did little to help lift audience numbers. It also reduced the availability of screening times for the sort of intelligent films that are regularly ignored by the global entertainment companies and rarely given local releases.

More troubling was the failure to hold a retrospective on any of cinema's great masters. This has been a regular feature of previous festivals and has provided patrons with the opportunity to study and discuss the work of some great artists. Whether the omission, along with other programming decisions, has increased attendances at the event will not be clear until overall figures are released. But irrespective of the final numbers, it is unlikely to arrest the general decline in cinematic culture or encourage a more critical and artistically rigorous atmosphere.

Notwithstanding these problems, the festival did screen a few worthwhile movies—the work of filmmakers who have refused to be stifled by a climate where the superficially sensational or what earns the highest profits is praised and rewarded.

Asian films

The films selected from mainland China this year—two documentaries (*Delamu* and *Kindergarten*) and a drama (*Two Great Sheep*)—were disappointing. By contrast the forthcoming Melbourne International Film Festival has an extensive selection of Chinese features—15 altogether. These include *Shanghai World*, the latest movie by Wang Xiaoshuai. It will also feature a guest appearance by director Jia Zhang-ke along with a retrospective of his work—*Pickpocket, Platform, Unknown Pleasures* and *The World*.

Wang and Jia are known for their artistic explorations of the vast social and economic changes now underway in China—mass migration from country to city, destruction of former state-owned industries and growing unemployment and social inequality. This approach in Chinese cinema, however, was entirely absent from the films screened in Sydney, which were bland and artistically commonplace works.

Delamu, for example, followed a mule train on the Tea-Horse Road, a dangerous and narrow transport route along the Nujing River between Western Yunan and Tibet. The ancient trade route, which extended into Nepal and India, estimated by some to be over 2,000 years old, carried tea, salt and other basic commodities. During filming the mules transported road-making supplies for a project that would eventually make the route outmoded and transform the isolated villages.

While *Delamu* contained some spectacular scenery, director Tian Zhuangzhuang provided no overall commentary or even a map detailing the trail. The almost two-hour film mainly concentrated on lengthy interviews with villagers along the way. Although some of these were of interest, particularly those with a 104-year-old woman, a Christian minister and a lonely Tibetan teacher, the film was little more than a National Geographic style travelogue and broke no new ground.

Tian previously directed *Horse Thief* (1985) and *The Blue Kite* (1992) before falling foul of the Beijing censors. With *Delamu*, his second film in over a decade, he seems to have taken the line of least resistance, determined to avoid any conflict with the Chinese government.

Kindergarten was even more insipid. Directed by Zhang Yiqing, head of the China Television Documentary Academic Association and well connected to the Beijing regime, it recorded the lives of children over a 14-month period at a Wuhan boarding kindergarten. Key moments of the children's stay—from their traumatic first day, to more routine events—were detailed. Notwithstanding some sensitive cinematography, Zhang's documentary failed to rise above saccharine sweetness.

Director Liu Hao's drama *Two Great Sheep* was set in 1996. China and India concerned the attempts of an ageing peasant couple to breed two imported sheep, which are supposed to lay the foundations for a new livestock company in the poverty-stricken area.

The prized animals, which were presented as a special gift by the region's deputy governor, are unsuited to the semi-desert area. Instead of providing the couple with the opportunity to make some money in their old age, the sheep—one American, the other French—complicate life for all concerned. The animals must be kept in the couple's rudimentary dwelling and be constantly cared for, including the provision of special foodstuffs and medical care.

Two Great Sheep certainly exposes the extraordinary poverty afflicting this rural area, which constitutes a damning indictment of the Chinese government. But the film is ponderous. There are references to the indifference of regional officials but Liu's film is not a systematic exposure of government bureaucracy, or comparable in any way with Zhang Yimou's 1992 *The Story of Qui Ju*, which was banned in China. Most of the 100-minute feature focused on providing tedious detail about how to maintain the sheep, its underlying aim being to demonstrate how wily peasants always triumph over officialdom.

Another film from Asia about rural life, but one that attempted to go beyond the surface appearances and probe some of the underlying problems confronting its protagonists, was the Vietnamese production *Buffalo Boy*, by director Minh Nguyen-vo. Adapted from a collection of short stories by Son Nam, Nguyen-vo's film, his first feature, is set during French colonial rule and just prior to the Japanese invasion of Vietnam. It tells the story of Kim (Le Thu Lu), a 15-year-old peasant boy, growing up in the southern province of Ca Mau.

The teenager and his ageing parents grow a small amount of rice but depend almost entirely on two buffaloes to maintain their precarious existence. Heavy flooding rains require that the animals be moved to pastures in another region or they will starve to death. The price demanded by a group of semi-criminal buffalo herders for taking the buffaloes there, however, is prohibitive.

Kim's father, a former buffalo herder, eventually realises that the family has no option and decides to send his teenage son and the two animals after the herders in the hope that they will accept an offer of 10 bags of rice as well as Kim's assistance. The leader agrees, and the teenager is accepted into the group and introduced to alcohol, drugs and various semi-criminal activities, including violent battles with rival buffalo herders. After numerous adventures and the death of one of the family's buffaloes, Kim returns home after the rain season and, much to the horror of his ailing father, declares that he plans to establish his own herding business.

Buffalo Boy is a poetic work with skilled cinematography by Yves Cape. Though set in the early 1940s, its themes-the difficult struggle for existence of a poor peasant family-obviously apply to countless numbers of people in Southeast Asia today. Director Minh Nguyen-vo approaches his subject with a maturity and sensitivity sadly missing from most of the Asian films presented at the Sydney Film Festival.

Kim Ki-duk

The festival also screened *Samaritan Girl* and *3 Iron*, two recent films by South Korean director Kim Ki-duk. Kim studied art in Paris and became a film writer and director after winning a screenwriting contest in his native Korea. He has written and directed 11 low-budget features since 1996.

Regarded as a controversial figure because of his unsettling combination of clinical sexuality, explicit violence and visual experimentation, his films began to catch the attention of various jaded US and European film writers and academics attracted by this unhealthy approach.

Bad Guy: Making My Girlfriend into a Whore was particularly praised, as was *The Isle*, which he wrote and directed in 1999. *The Isle* is reportedly so gruesome in parts that one critic at the Venice Film Festival blacked out during a screening.

Samaritan Girl, which has been acclaimed as "transcendental" by various critics and awarded a Silver Bear prize at last year's Berlin International Film Festival is about child prostitution in South Korea, where an estimated half a million teenagers are involved in the practice. Although Kim's film has some arresting moments, it fails to seriously examine what is clearly a major problem in South Korea and other Asian countries, or the factors that have produced it.

The movie, which is divided into three half-hour segments, is about two high school students—Jae-young and Yeo-jin—who become involved in prostitution in order to save money for a trip to Europe. The segments are entitled "Vasumitra", "Samaria" and "Sonata".

Unlike most of those caught up in prostitution, the two girls are not poor but are moved by other more complex social and psychological forces. What these might be, however, is never explored. Instead Kim overloads *Samaritan Girl* with Christian and Buddhist metaphors and various mystical references to sin and moral atonement.

When Jae-young is killed during a police raid—she cracks her head open after leaping from a hotel window—Yeo-jin, who had previously acted as her pimp, is stricken with guilt. She decides that the only way to ease her psychological pain and be absolved of her sins is by repaying all the men Jae-young slept with. She also decides, in turn, to have sex them.

Yeo-jin's widowed father is a police detective and eventually discovers his daughter's activities. Instead of confronting the girl he begins hunting the men down, killing one and provoking another to commit suicide. The film's bizarre final segment involves a dream sequence in which Yeo-jin imagines that her father strangles and buries her. She awakes to find that he wants to teach her to drive, but, after an initial lesson, he drives off leaving her alone.

While Kim is sympathetic to the young girls and the plight of others trapped in prostitution, *Samaritan Girl* is cold and detached. Its director appears to be almost entirely preoccupied with impressing his audience with clever and artfully framed images at the expense of probing his subject matter. Such is Kim's clinical approach that the two high school girls and the father are the only ones named in the film. The rest of the cast is anonymous with the following character list: neat guy, tough guy, lucky guy, guy who kills himself, guy who gets killed, etc.

The movie, according to Kim, is aimed at encouraging audiences to "transcend religion" by demonstrating that "misery and happiness are the same". This is both unfeeling and nonsensical. Asked whether the two real-life high school girls used for the lead roles might be affected by their parts, he replied: "The main characters in my films were always shocked after acting in my films and it hurts me that they'll be living with shock afterwards. But that's life."

After enduring Kim's depressing 95-minute film I decided there was not much to gain from watching his *3 Iron*, which deals with an affair between a homeless man and an abused wife. The homeless man kills the woman's husband with golf balls hit by a 3-iron golf club.

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As previously noted there were some worthwhile movies screened at this year's festival. The best of these included the British *A Way of Life* and *Omagh*, intense dramas, respectively, about poverty and racism in Wales and the impact of the 1998 Omagh terrorist bombing.

Yesterday from South Africa and *Story Undone* from Iran were also

skilled and refreshingly humane works that draw attention to serious social issues in both countries.

The screening of *People on Sunday*, a silent 1929 German feature directed by Robert Siodmak and Edgar G. Silmar, with script by Billy Wilder and Fred Zinneman, was also a highlight. These and other films will be the subject of future comment.