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Pacific overtures

Film

25th SF International Asian American Film Festival

by David Lamble



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This silver anniversary edition of the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival (March 15-25) features 125 titles: narrative features in competition, highlights from the festival's archives, cutting-edge documentaries and a wide variety of short films, including the annual program of Asian music videos. A highlight in the documentary division is openly gay director Arthur Dong's examination of a century of Chinese American filmmaking, *Hollywood Chinese* (3/18, *Castro*). The Festival has new venues for films and special events: AMC 1000 Van Ness Theatres and Landmark's Opera Plaza Cinema join the Castro Theatre, the Palace of Fine Arts, the Asian Art Museum, Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive and the Camera 12 Cinemas in San Jose.



Scene from *King and the Clown*.
Photo: CJ Entertainment

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King and the Clown "What the hell is going on? Every time we do a show, people wind up dead! Thanks to that loose cannon of a king!" Two bumpkin jugglers — one a shrewd showman, Jang-seng (Karm Woo-sung); the other a showgirl-pretty female impersonator, Gong-gil (Lee Joon-gi) — escape a local militia only to be arrested for satirizing the King, a tyrant with immoderate appetites and a penchant for cruelty. Unexpectedly, the King finds humor in the fools, and soon they're mocking every institution at court, including the King's mistress and a bevy of courtesans who poisoned his mother. The King's lust for the fair-skinned Gong-gil upsets the balance of power and almost gets the boys lynched. Part low comedy, part tragic melodrama, this kinetically staged slice of history cooks with a surprisingly modern homo sensibility, while delivering speeches that hint of the Bard. "The world's but a stage! Kingly is he who struts for a while, then exits in style!" (3/18, *Castro*; 3/24, *San Jose*)

Lead Role: Father Writer/director PJ Raval finds an odd angle from which to observe a gay filmmaker's long-severed bonds with his bio-dad. On a rainy night, a young director, Ron (Robert Chu), is hitting a wall trying to cast the small but pivotal role of a father in his low-budget film. After rejecting several older actors, Ron is confronted by an unwelcome audition from his own long-estranged dad (Shan Chuan Liu). Over 15 minutes, through some anguished readings of the script, son and father are forced to confront just what was meant by a long-ago argument about taking out "the garbage before you visit your friends." A riveting kick-off to the *How to be Good* program about dicey family ties. (3/18, 21, *1000 Van Ness*)

Police Box Hong Kong writer/director Josh Kim gives us a delightful puzzle-box of a short in which messages left at a police call-station are hilariously misinterpreted, until desire finally overcomes inhibition and custom. Begins the *Love's Labor & Other Complications* program. (3/18, *1000 Van Ness*; 3/24, *San Jose*)

Dark Matters Liu Ye, the beautiful young actor who stole the hearts of queer filmgoers as the sensitive gay Chinese student in Stanley Kwan's *Lan Yu*, shares the screen with Meryl Streep

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and Aidan Quinn in director Chen Shi-Zheng's (written by Billy Shebar) exploration of the tragic collision between the dreams of a Chinese physics student and the harsh reality of



Na Kamalei: The Men of Hula.
Photo: Courtesy Asian American Film Festival

scientific politics in American academia. Based on a true incident in which a Chinese exchange student went on a shooting rampage at a school in the States, the filmmakers show how the impossibly idealistic Liu Xing gradually becomes disillusioned, then delusional as his American dream unravels in a miasma of cultural misunderstanding and professional jealousy in the impossibly wide-open spaces of a Western university

(the film was shot in Utah).

Liu Xing and his fellow exchange students are taken by Streep's den-mother character to visit a Western ghost town, where the young men get to indulge their fantasies of having a make-believe gunfight in which all the participants fall to the ground make-believe dead. This scene resonates tragically at story's end, seamlessly weaving fantasy and reality, as well as the often impossibly conflicting cultural imperatives of two proud societies. (*Closing night, 3/22, Palace*)

The Great Happiness Space: Tale of an Osaka Love Thief Checking out the fashion magazines in Japantown, I've often wondered what all the queer-appearing 20something Japanese men could possibly be up to. Jake Clennell was in Osaka to film a teenage baseball league when he started noticing guys who looked like they were trying out for a boy band, hanging out in a seedy part of town. Turns out the guys are "hosts" at underground clubs catering to young women with rather too much cash and spare time.

The 22-year-old owner of the Rakkyo Cafe, Issei describes how he rakes in up to \$50,000 a month pretending to be in love with some rather footloose young gals. The women, many of whom work as prostitutes to support their Issei habit, spend \$12-\$60 an hour for his time, and \$500 a pop for bottles of Champagne. Clennell's artfully filmed exploration of the host clubs reveals a society that still has little regard for the needs of a new generation of quasi-liberated women. The climax of the film has a woman patron boasting how she plans to win Issei's love by plying him with ever-increasing amounts of cash. Meanwhile, Issei is telling the filmmaker that the woman is both delusional and a bore. Issei explains that the hosts make a point of not going to bed with their female clients. The occupation hazards of their profession are considerable: long hours, emotional numbness, and the fear one's liver may be shot by age 30. (*3/18, 1000 Van Ness*)

Na Kamalei: The Men of Hula Hula dancer and filmmaker Lisette Marie Flanary explores the 30th anniversary of a pioneering all-male dance troupe that has won prizes and overcome gender clichés far beyond Hawaii. A queer viewer may not enjoy self-defensive explanations as to why male dancers should not be dismissed as sissies, but ultimately we're won over by the sheer exuberance of the veteran company and its adorably profane father figure, founding guru Robert Cazimero. The gruff hula daddy frequently bawls out his adoring pupils (ages 18 to 60+); his style runs the gamut from Knute Rockne to Martha Graham. It becomes very clear that he loves his charges and takes particular pride in the part his company has taken in the revival of native Hawaiians' appreciation and mastery of their culture. It's still not easy to be an all-male hula company, one veteran confesses as he assembles the traditional wreath of flowers. "All the ingredients for this are on the endangered species list, except us." In the end, we comprehend why "it is a special honor for a man to dance the hula for you." (*3/16, 1000 Van Ness*)

The Wash This revival screening celebrates the life of a Japanese American woman, Nobu (Nobu McCarthy), who walks out on her 40-year marriage but still does her ex-husband's laundry. This 1988 production (written by Bay Area playwright Philip Kan Gotanda; directed by Michael Toshiyuki Uno) marks a watershed in Asian American film history for its depiction of a divorced Nisei (Japanese American) couple still bound by unspoken ties and ritual duties, and for the powerful if low-key performances by the late Mako, a legend for his Oscar and his career pioneering non-stereotypical roles for Asian actors; and McCarthy, who first played opposite Jerry Lewis in *The Geisha Boy*, then continued to appear in Asian-themed Hollywood films. (*3/20, 1000 Van Ness*)



Love for Share Writer/director Nina Dinata, acclaimed for helming Indonesia's first gay film *Arisan!*, returns with a lively farce about the pitfalls of polygamy in the world's largest Muslim society. Dinata seamlessly spins three interconnecting stories. A prominent gynecologist is shocked when her politically ambitious husband ambushes her with the reality of the first of several wives he's acquired behind her back, each with children. A village girl's hopes for big-city living are stymied when the uncle she seeks shelter from turns out to be a lusty pig with a harem in the making. Ironically, Siti finds herself becoming unnaturally attached to one of the wives. A gorgeous waitress plays the claims of an older restaurant-owner against an ambitious and handsome young filmmaker. With more to say about polygamy than a season of HBO's *Big Love*, Dinata also gives us a subtly feminist comic postcard of the life in back allies of modern Jakarta, where the Koran seems to sanction a fair amount of male hanky panky, but where the women can check male appetites. (3/17, 21, 1000 Van Ness; 3/24, PFA)

Three documentaries deserve special mention: Ted Nakamura's **Pilgrimage** (3/17, 1000 Van Ness; 3/24, San Jose) links the movement by Japanese Americans to consecrate the WWII internment with the African American Civil Rights movement. Tami Yeager's **A Dream in Doubt** (3/20, 1000 Van Ness) examines a wave of post-9/11 violence against the Sikh community in Arizona and San Francisco, the film making disturbing parallels to the wave of anti-Asian sentiment in the 1980s documented in the pioneering *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* Finally, Mirabelle Ang's **Match Made** (3/18, 22, 1000 Van Ness) profiles the odd phenomenon of Vietnamese mail-order brides in search of Chinese and Korean husbands.

www.asianamericanfilmfestival.org

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