



Li Haibin and Qi Zhongyang in *Electric Shadows*

## MEMORIES AT 32 FRAMES PER SECOND

### *Electric Shadows*

review by M. Faust

A chance encounter causes a man to remember his past, when as a child in a rural village he was obsessed with movies and the run-down theater that showed them to people eager for an evening's respite from their hard lives.

You may recognize that as the plot of *Cinema Paradiso*. But it's also the story of *Electric Shadows*, a film from mainland China by the first-time director Xiao Jiang, who grew up in the same era that much of her movie chronicles.

The story begins in present day Beijing, where Mao Dabing makes a living with his bicycle delivering bottled water. He doesn't earn much, but every cent he can spare is spent on movies.

One day an accident involves him with Ling Ling, an apparently mentally disturbed young woman. Arrested, she refuses to speak to either the police or Dabing. But she does give him the key to her apartment and asks him to feed her fish. Puzzled by the odd request, he complies, only to find her apartment a virtual shrine to movies, complete with a 16mm projector. He finds a diary written in the form of a movie and begins to read.

The film goes back to 1971 and rural Ningxia province. We learn the circumstances of Ling Ling's birth: Her mother Xuehua is determined to become a singing star, but is trapped by pregnancy when her lover abandons her. During the Cultural Revolution, life is dreary and hard, enlivened only by the few movies that are allowed to be shown at the town's outdoor theater.

As a young girl, Ling Ling comes to share her mother's obsession with movies, even believing that her father is a famous

movie star. She finds a playmate in Xiaobing, a new boy in town whose difficult family life has kept him back in school. Though at first he is the bane of her existence (as is often the case with six-year-old boys and girls), they bond over their shared status as outcasts and their love of movies. When they are separated, reads Dabing—who is, of course, the grown-up Xiaobing—it seems to Ling Ling that her life begins a downward spiral that has yet to hit bottom.

In her director's statement, Xiao Jiang makes no mention of *Cinema Paradiso*, and the similarities are so striking, including a lush musical score, that it's hard to believe she hasn't seen that much-loved Italian film. But it's not impossible: People who chose the cinema as a career are likely to have been children who were obsessed with movies (and by association the places where they spent so many happy hours watching them, though I doubt that movie fans now coming of age will have as many happy memories of their mall multiplexes as I do of the Bailey, Genesee and Kensington Theaters I frequented as a child).

Fashioned as a love letter to a simpler era (the most tragic part of the story accompanies the impending destruction of the outdoor movie house when the rise of televisions and VCR decimate its business), *Electric Shadows* uses the difficulties of recent Chinese history only as backdrop. The travails of its characters are occasionally melodramatic, wrapped up with a rather curt happy ending, but they're still wholly satisfying for audiences who like old-fashioned storytelling. The child actors playing Ling Ling and Xiaobing are effortlessly irresistible. **av**

"FEROCIOUSLY  
FRIGHTENING."

DENNIS DERMODY, *PAPER*

"THIS BLOWS ALL THE OTHER  
RECENT REMAKES AWAY..."

INTENSE AND  
SCARY TO THE MAX."

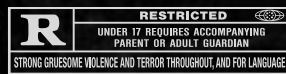
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