



Shu Qi and Chang Chen in *Three Times*

IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME

Three Times

review by Girish Shambu

Audiences at large film festivals like Cannes have long regarded Hou Hsiao-Hsien, from Taiwan, as one of the very best filmmakers alive. Last year, of the 35 or so films I caught at the Toronto International Film Festival, *Three Times* was the strongest and most memorable. If there were any justice in the world of movies,

Hou would be a household name, the way that Bergman, Fellini and Truffaut were in the 1960s.

There are many reasons why film culture today isn't what it used to be in the 1960s. For one thing, the market for movies has splintered into niches, driven by demographic tailoring. The gulf between mov-

ies as "art" and "commerce" has never been larger. This is unfortunate because the work of some of the most exciting filmmakers remains relatively unknown to the public at large. Until *Three Times*, none of Hou's films has ever opened in Buffalo, though they are easily available on DVD. (Of these, *Flowers of Shanghai*, from 1998, is a flat-out masterpiece.)

Three Times tells three novella-like love stories. The same actress and actor appear in all three of them—the drop-dead gorgeous Shu Qi, best-known to Western audiences from *The Transporter*, and Chang Chen, from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

In the first story, "A Time for Love," set in 1966, a conscripted soldier meets a young woman who works as a hostess in a billiards parlor, and they spend a few hours together before he returns to duty. When he comes back for her, she has moved on; he tries to find her. Rather than being driven by an eventful plot, Hou instead puts in place a romantic and wistful mood as he details idyllic days, with men and women whiling away their afternoons in pool halls, languidly sipping beer while "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes" wafts in the air. The setting is rural, green and sunny; the atmosphere is bathed in nostalgia. The episode builds to a quiet and unexpected transcendence.

The second story, "A Time for Freedom," takes place in 1911 during the height of the Japanese occupation of Taiwan. A writer and aspiring revolutionary befriends a courtesan who works in a brothel. Like a silent film, this segment

contains no dialogue and the story is told through intertitle cards. All the action is confined indoors, and the hothouse atmosphere hints at the connections between the personal lives of the characters and the historical moment they live in. Just as the woman in the brothel longs to be emancipated, so does Taiwan from its occupiers. None of this is spelled out didactically, but instead silently floats like a backdrop to the love story.

The final part, "A Time for Youth," is set in the teeming present-day Taipei and deals with the love triangle of a bisexual, sultry, postpunk singer and her male and female lovers. Hou films this segment very differently from the previous two, using handheld camera, closeups and urban neon-slashed interiors. This segment is the most ambiguous of the three, with its characters quietly adrift in a world of omnisexual experimentation and druggy oblivion. The rustic outdoors and amber-lit prostitutes' quarters of the previous segments are now replaced by full-screen closeups of cell phone text messages and Web sites. Interestingly, each story is told in a cinematic style appropriate to the time in which that story is set.

More than plot, it's the hypnotic manner in which Hou tells his stories that is key here: The tone is quiet and modest, and the movie unfolds at the speed of life, not the accelerated momentum of a Hollywood blockbuster. By minimizing dialogue and leaning hard on his exquisitely composed images, he gently reminds us that the movies are, above all, a visual medium.

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