



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.

av

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## WHAT DOES BECOME A LEGEND MOST?

### Superman Returns

review by George Sax



Brandon Routh in *Superman Returns*

When Warner Bros. reacquired the film rights to the Superman franchise in 1992, the studio's production execs must have thought it would be fairly easy to come up with a movie that could take advantage of the new, darker and nastier comics-derived superhero style established by Tim Burton's *Batman*. They couldn't have imagined what would ensue.

Now, this week, after 13 years of tempest-tossed, green-light/red-light games, fake starts, concept conflicts and confusion, the concrete fruition of this profligate meshugaas is being unveiled. If retirements and head-rolling result from the possible inadequate success of *Superman Returns* (some allegedly informed observers estimate the movie has to take in \$600 million internationally to turn a profit), it will be more a coda than a climax to this extravagant self-travesty of an industry saga.

To give you a small idea: The director known as McG (Joseph McGinty Nichol) refused to board a flight to Australia, where the movie was eventually made, because he doesn't fly over water. He was paid off with \$3 million. This was his second go at the project and he was one of five directors engaged—six if you count his two employments separately.

Forgive my digressive observations, but Hollywood is so often more interesting than its products, which is true of capitalism in general.

And what of *Superman Returns*? Well, it packs a surprising amount of entertainment for something that resulted from a caricaturedly tortuous corporate process. If it's not worth what it cost, it's still the best of the recent superhero extravaganzas.

Superman (portrayed now by newcomer Brandon Routh) is the first and most famous of pulpdom's fantastically heroic figures, and that very ur-status might seem to limit his contemporary utility as a pop product. He's kind of shopworn, conceptually. How can the Man of Steel, bound to Metropolis and *The Daily Planet*, function in a global environment?

Bryan Singer's movie deftly finesses and evades this problem, for the most part, by concentrating on the big guy's emotional problems, mainly his relationship with Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth). The story is ostensibly driven

by a grotesquely grandiose, and rather incomprehensible, plot by Lex Luthor (Kevin Spacey) to create a new, Atlantis-like continent through the use of crystallography and some purloined Kryptonite. But the real heart of *Superman Returns* is its hero's challenged, suppressed longing for Lois and her resentful, conflicted reactions.

Superman has to return because he's left her and Metropolis in the lurch. As the movie opens, there's an on-screen text that tells us, "When astronomers discovered the remains of his home planet, Superman disappeared." For five years, as it happens, for he went to see what was left.

On reappearing after his disappointing trip, he finds Lois has a boyfriend and a five-year-old son. Ahem.

The movie has its spectacle and special-effects-driven derring-do, and a little of the old *Daily Planet* he-she comedic raillery, but it's pitched toward the human interest side. Singer has been unexpectedly successful in sustaining an intense, almost swoony, sentimental atmosphere amid the movie's large-scale escapades. *Superman Returns* is really more a love story than a fantasy-action vehicle.

Singer not only works up the emo feel, he gets away with some scarcely subtextual, intergenerational, Christian Trinity stuff using, among other devices, voiceovers from the late Marlon Brando's role in the first Superman movie in 1978.

It's no more than slickly executed moonshine, of course, but the movie's achievement is to make it palatable. You can be both amused and involved.

*Superman Returns* is about as worthy a reworking of this old warhorse pulp material as anyone had a right to anticipate.

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