In Case You Missed It: Cape No. 7

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By Peter Zarrow

“Cape No. 7” (海角七號) is an energetic bon-bon of a film that is Taiwan’s official entry for the Oscars this year, in the “best foreign film” category. Who was it who first compared a certain type of movie to the bon-bon? The Taiwanese film sensation “Cape No. 7” fits the description perfectly. Light romantic comedy with an edge of tragic love lost. And above all, let’s all rock together—Hoklo, aborigines, young and old, Japanese—even an energetic Hakka!—invited into the mix. Not a corrupt politician or political judge in sight. The film even had, now that I’m thinking of confectionary, an otherwise completely pointless set of cute triplets for the frosting.

I like bon-bons as much as anyone, and while not a great film, “Cape No. 7” is a perfectly fine two-plus hours of entertainment with a number of very witty jokes. I laughed, I wept, I thought of Oscar Wilde (One must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing), which wasn’t really apropos but still came to mind. My inner curmudgeon was summoned forth, as is perhaps increasingly the case with age. Other reasons will appear below.

The plot, in brief: Aga阿嘉, wannabe Taipei rock star, returns home to Hengchun and becomes a postman. Meanwhile, his stepfather, a town councilman, forces a local hotel that is putting together a big rock concert to use local talent to open the show. Slowly, a band is put together, led by Aga, and even more slowly an attraction develops between Aga and Tomoko友子, the Mandarin-speaking Japanese given the job of putting the band together. Aga is not exactly a prize specimen (lazy on his postal route as well as moody pretty much all the time) but his pout is so cool that he can do anything. Tomoko is actually more interesting and makes things happen. In an undeliverable package, Aga discovers letters originally written in 1945 by a Japanese teacher to his Taiwanese lover, also named Tomoko. Narration of these letters provides a tragic wrap-around story—a small sour plum in the middle of the bon-bon.
Bloggers and critics have complained about the wrap-around, which does seem a little forced and completely irrelevant till the end of the film. But the film would have been no less sentimental and even more arbitrary without it. The sixty-year-old love story not only has a certain gravitas but links “Cape No. 7” with Taiwanese memory and a set of films that touches on the Japanese colonial experience. Furthermore, the wrap-around story does lead to the climax of the film, when Aga finally actually does something, and he and Tomoko declare their love in front of the concert’s fans, who were enthusiastic although, strangely, not one of whom looked stoned.

The question I then ask, is how this pleasant but inconsequential film became the country’s most successful box office, within three months of its release last August the second top grossing film here ever (after only “Titanic”). And this mostly by word of mouth, without a great marketing budget. In December, “Cape No. 7” won several Golden Horse awards (Taiwan’s Oscars for Chinese-language films). And it has launched or revived several careers.

Sociologically, the question can only be asked with prejudice, for it brackets the issue of aesthetic worth. Some of the film’s popularity might have reflected the attraction of recognition. There are actors themselves—pop stars and walk-ons by a few winners from the “Taiwanese Idol”-type TV shows. Plus the sheer range provided by local yueqin (月琴) master Lin Zongren 林宗仁 and J-pop star Kousuke Atari 中孝介. There are Taiwanese social types to identify with, particularly disaffected (but not too disaffected) youth, and the obnoxious but sad entrepreneurs just trying to get what’s theirs. Not to mention the one falling-down drunk obligatory at every wedding. There is certainly the music, mostly contemporary pop but also various folk music and even a climatic Guomindang-era song once learned by every school kid. Finally, there is the geography, such as the beaches of Kenting—the film literally begins with the hero, disgusted and disappointed, heading out of big ugly Taipei. Thus we can spend the next two hours in more bucolic surroundings—emerald isle rice fields and the broad ocean, to which both our tormented hero and his very untormented stepfather turn for comfort. And the number of clear-sky rainbows is simply surreal. I originally had hopes of that stepfather, a rude and pushy city councilman who could have made a good villain. However, he turned out just to be a lovable—crude but well-meaning—local town booster.

The question of identity does have a political side as well. It is no accident that the plot revolves around the growing friendship of people from different backgrounds and two Japanese-Taiwanese love affairs. A bunch of racially mixed foreign models appears at the beginning of the film but they promptly disappear. Still, they perhaps make a point about Taiwan’s cosmopolitan nature—that the real Taiwan is a product of its own peoples.

I think even more of the success of the movie came from its insidious flattery of its audience. There is not the slightest hint of social criticism. Even the hotels that monopolize the very limited shoreline are just a part of the condition that is, after all, necessary for us all to make beautiful music together. So perish the thought they might be a despoiling presence. Granted, bon-bons are not supposed to deconstruct the problems of society, but for “Cape No. 7” it is as if there is no larger society at all. This is notwithstanding the somewhat grim Guomindang soldiers who appear at briefly the reprisal of the parting of the lovers in 1945—but that’s long, long ago and even far, far away (perhaps Kaohsiung).

This brings me to a final point. By the Hollywood standards of “romantic comedy” there is rather a lot of tragedy and mishap. A film without a good deal of sadness would surely feel incomplete or somehow just wrong in Taiwan. But as long as the film-makers avoid virtually any hint that there might be something wrong with contemporary Taiwan, tragic elements remain sentimental indulgence. The wrap-around story of the 1945 separation of the Japanese teacher and his Taiwanese lover—that small sour plum in the rock’n’roll bon-bon—reminds us just a bit of the cruelties of the colonial period, but even more speaks of reconciliation, now that Aga has his new Tomoko. The West is irrelevant. The Mainland isn’t helpful, as the 1945 shot of the parting lovers, framed with the Guomindang slogan “The Recovery of Taiwan,” makes clear. The slogan seems either ironic, from the point of view of Taiwanese separated from Japanese friends, or just irrelevant, from the point of view of the younger generation.
It has been professionally predicted ("Variety," Nov. 7, 2008) that "Cape No. 7" will not do so well in the West. But it would be interesting to see how it plays in China—if it ever does. It was originally slated to become the first Taiwanese film allowed in for over a decade, but recent news reports suggest that censors have had a rethink. I wonder if they are having trouble with that small sour plum, or with the Taiwanese bon-bon itself.