The Girl Can't Help It

What's Stolen Life got to do with the price of eggs in China?

By Kelly Vance

September 13, 2006

It's tempting to imagine the contemporary Chinese social drama *Stolen Life* as some sort of referendum on those working-class people left behind in China's recent economic boom. But director Li Shaohang's matter-of-fact story of an unlucky young woman named Yanni really belongs to a far older brand of screen entertainment. For all its rough immediacy and cool tone, *Stolen Life* is nothing more or less than an old-fashioned class-antagonism melodrama about a young university student seduced and abandoned by a deceitful truck driver. Aside from its modern-day setting in a bustling, indifferent Beijing, the scenario might have been concocted by D.W. Griffith or King Vidor in the 1920s — a cautionary tale for people too busy scratching out a living to pay attention.

Sorry for the spoiler, but from the beginning first-person voiceover, it's no secret that Yanni's life is a tragedy in the making — an ordinary, commonplace, inevitable tragedy, but a tragedy all the same. Yanni is a type of adolescent female we're all familiar with. You've seen her before, the quiet girl no one especially pays attention to, the one with downcast eyes and a dark knit cap pulled down over her head, as if hiding from the world. Yanni is out of step, waiting for her moment to arrive. She lives with her bitter, scolding aunt and grandmother in Beijing, shyly trying to fit in with the family but failing. Her mother and father work on a farm in the country and have entrusted Yanni to their city relatives — we gradually learn that they were part of the original "sent down" generation, urban intellectuals exiled to a life of hard manual labor during China's Cultural Revolution in the '60s. And so Yanni, the daughter of "capitalist roaders," has a tough time of it because of her parents' misfortune — something like Oliver Twist. "I've never been master of my fate," she confides in voiceover.

Suddenly Yanni gets her break, acceptance to the university, and her luck seems poised to change. Her parents are paying for her education even though they remain in the background, and now she has a chance to make something of herself. On the big day, she takes a taxi to the university with her luggage, but a traffic jam forces her
to get out and walk. A delivery van driver happens by and offers her a ride. Bingo. That's when "my ruin and downfall began," Yanni's omniscient voice murmurs.

The driver, Muyu, looks like a rock musician, and wears the same kind of knit cap as Yanni. He seems to understand what she has been through ('I'm an orphan myself'), and they bond instantly. He takes her to the drive-in and they share their life stories. She has finally discovered her soul mate. Her luck is almost unbelievable. At last someone appreciates her for what she is. Never mind that he, a peasant, can't help looking at her as a spoiled college kid. There is that one incident, when she stumbles upon Muyu with another woman and a baby — the woman chases Yanni down the street with a meat cleaver, but even that fails to discourage Yanni. She's determined to follow her fate. In no time, Yanni moves in with Muyu in a dank room in Beijing's Underground City, and her schoolwork takes a backseat. And the trip down the rabbit hole continues.

Actors Zhou Xun (Yanni) and Wu Jun (Muyu) both have that untrained nonprofessional naturalism that convinces us we're somehow watching real life magically unfold before us in digital video. Director Li sets it up that way. As one of China's "fifth-generation" filmmakers trained at the Beijing Film Academy in the '80s, she evidently specializes in ultrarealistic scenarios like that of Yanni, in which tough stories blossom out into unexpected moral tales, subtle object lessons on the plight of women. We can go ahead and add "globalization" or "free-market" to director Li's critique of Yanni's predicament, but there's no need to. Her story is ancient, and yet it seems completely fresh.

_Stolen Life_ (screenplay by Liao Yimei from a story by An Olin) plays at Oakland's Grand Lake Theater six times beginning Thursday, September 14 at 7:00 p.m. It's part of the Global Lens Film Festival, a traveling package of eight feature films and five shorts presented by the Global Film Initiative, an org dedicated to providing independent filmmakers from all over the world a chance to reach US audiences. As such, this series acts as a stopgap between art-film venues and the museum and festival one-off circuit for audiences longing to see what's out there beyond the multiplexes. Global Film's advisory board reads like an A-list of world art filmmakers: Pedro Almodóvar, Mira Nair, Lars von Trier, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Jia Zhangke, Béla Tarr, Lucy Barreto, Christopher Doyle, Carlos Reygadas, et al.

The 2006 Global Lens lineup, which includes films from Brazil (_Almost Brothers and Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures_), Iran (_Border Cafe_), Lebanon (_In the Battlefields_), South Africa (_Max and Mona_), and Burkina Faso (_The Night of Truth_) in addition to China's _Stolen Life_, plays theaters in fifteen US cities, including the San Francisco Art Institute, the Mexican Heritage Plaza in San Jose, and the Rafael Film Center in San Rafael. Visit GlobalFilm.org to learn more.
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