

FILM

Two treats for cinephiles

New releases are worth the patience they require

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

The River, the latest from acclaimed Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-Liang, at first seems to reflect an almost unbridgeable cultural gap between East and West—or at least between Eastern and Western storytelling. It is meditative, meticulously paced and often nearly as slow and uneventful as real time.

Those of us more accustomed to the cinema of the United States, Europe or even Asia (films from Hong Kong often are shot and edited so energetically as to make *Die Hard* look like *My Dinner with André*) might be tempted to give up on *The River*, with its open-ended narrative, crawling pace and refusal to provide any sort of emotional map to guide the viewer's response. That would be a shame, though, because the film does have a story to tell, and although it requires patience and effort from the audience, it is as universal as any traditional three-act structure we're used to seeing in the movies.

What we're witnessing in *The River* is similar to what Ang Lee, by far the most famous Taiwanese director, showed us in the excellent *The Ice Storm*: a detached family living separately under the same roof like strangers. The particular manifestations of dysfunction in this household: The father escapes to gay bathhouses, the mother diverts herself through a halfhearted affair with a pornography smuggler, and their 20-something son drifts aimlessly.

Near the beginning of *The River*, the young



The universal story in *The River* unfolds slowly

man comes down with an inexplicable neck pain that becomes increasingly unbearable but cannot be cured by doctors or healers. Further odd occurrences—he is picked at random by a film director to play a dead body floating in a polluted river, the father notices a leak in his bedroom ceiling from the apartment upstairs and merely takes the stopgap measure of placing a bucket underneath it—seem to portend impending disaster, or perhaps breakthrough.

The discomfiting conclusion (made even more shocking by Ming-Liang's decision to unfold it at the same deliberate, natural pace as the rest of *The River*) could be seen as either or

both. He clearly doesn't believe in the all-resolving epiphany, which would be out of place here.

Because of a print delay, *The River* was screened on video, a disaster for a Ming-Liang film. The beautifully framed and carefully lit scenes (fortunately familiar to this reviewer from having seen the director's remarkable previous release, *The Hole*) were washed-out and sometimes barely visible. Still, the problem served as a reminder of how crucial Ming-Liang's austere visuals are to his films—and as an enticement to see *The River* on glorious celluloid, where his composed but never complacent vision can be truly appreciated.

Barbara Hammer, a legend of underground lesbian cinema, has been making films for decades. *History Lessons* is her 75th work, but there's no musty venerability or overly rarefied air of "art" about her collage of footage depicting or documenting lesbian behavior from 1896 right up to pre-Stonewall 1969. Rather, it's an exhaustively researched, fascinating anthropological subversion of how lesbians have been portrayed in mass culture since the cinema's inception at the end of the 19th century.

History Lessons opens with footage of Eleanor Roosevelt addressing a symposium of women, ostensibly about equal rights. But the clip's sound

and reaction shots have been altered to suggest the first lady is inciting the audience to something akin to Sapphic revolution, a bit of jaunty irreverence that sets the tone for the rest of the film.

History Lessons is foremost a work of juxtaposition. Footage of early, primly earnest feminist political rhetoric is followed with banal, male-narrated newsreel footage of "modern" women who can fly military aircraft but nonetheless retain their femininity by worrying about getting their hair wet.

Interspersed throughout are randy clips of silent lesbian erotica, cheesy '60s stag films, shots of cartoonish lesbian-themed pulp paperback covers and artistically intriguing Roaring '20s footage of lesbian flappers. These range from naughty to nasty to pornographic and feature women of many ages, sizes and backgrounds from throughout the first half of the 20th century vigorously enjoying what seems to be a wide gamut of sexual practices.

Hammer doesn't shy away from the horrifying, either. The film contains footage, shot by Thomas Edison, of a lesbian being lynched.

Some of Hammer's more self-conscious, "post-modern" montages are more strident than clever, ringing comparatively hollow and disrupting the already sufficiently significant flow of found images. Still, most of *History Lessons* comes off.

As a whole, Hammer's project has an innate historical value. It's a uniquely thorough, eye-opening document of lesbianism as a motif in a typically unfriendly, unenlightened culture. **J**

CLINTON STREET THEATER, 2522 S.E. Clinton St., screens *The River* Nov. 16 to 21 and *History Lessons* Nov. 23 to 28. For more information call 503-238-8899.

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Portland writer and filmmaker.

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page 51