

Capturing Rare Beauty

In a Medieval Chinese box

HOUSE OF FLYING DAGGERS:

Directed by Zhang Yimou. Written by Li Feng, Zhang Yimou, and Wang Bin. Produced by Bill Kong. Executive producer, Zhang Weiping. Cinematography, Zhao Xiaoding. Editor, Cheng Long. Action director, Tony Ching Siu-Tung. Production design, Huo Tingxiao. Sound, Tao Jing. Composer, Shigeru Umebayashi. Theme song sung by Kathleen Battle. Costumes, Emi Wada. Starring Zhang Ziyi, Takeshi Kaneshiro, Andy Lau and Song Dandan. Sony Pictures Classics, 2004. NR. 119 minutes.

This martial arts love story, *House of Flying Daggers*, celebrates Chinese director Zhang Yimou's third cinematic incarnation of himself. During the Cultural Revolution, Zhang emerged as a leader among China's Fifth Generation Filmmakers, making internationally honored films such as *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1992), and *To Live* (1994). But a few years ago he re-imagined his cinematic mission, making such documentary-like, "small" films as *The Road Home* (1999) and *Not One Less* (1999).

An energetic, award-winning filmmaker, Zhang's now stealing Hong Kong's thunder as a Mainland action director. *Flying Daggers* is his second foray (*Hero*, 2003) into traditional *Wuxia* movies with this difference: Zhang's work includes passion, love, romance and interesting characters who drive the action.

Just as Zhang's earlier films featured the luminous Gong Li, surely one of world cinema's most beautiful stars, his new pictures worship the rare beauty of 25-year-old Zhang Ziyi (*Hero*, *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon*).

In *Flying Daggers* both Takeshi Kaneshiro as Lin and Andy Lau as Leo are in love with Mei (Zhang Ziyi), and who can blame them?

As a genre, martial arts films use conventions similar to Westerns, and one of the tropes

bad beginning, fight for their lives against government soldiers simultaneously attacking Zhang both from the tree tops and the forest floor, using bamboo weapons as well as swords, daggers, etc. But Mei and Lin have sorcery (and CGI effects) on their side. Nevertheless, it's a stunning piece of action theater.

Another show-stopper happens early in the film, a battle of wills between Mei and Captain Leo called the "Echo Game." Mei is a blind

Much of the film is acted out in the natural world of meadows, woods, streams and wetlands, where the three major characters meet or travel together. As in *Hero*, the autumn colors of the forest add drama to the love triangle onscreen. The woods can be an ominous place, where danger from outside steals silently toward the characters. One fabulous image shows Li lovingly constructing a one-person bathtub deep within a reed-covered pond for the lovely Mei, then watching her surreptitiously.

The political struggles of 859 AD during the bloody decline of the Tang Dynasty are used mainly to draw a line and place the characters on one side or the other, depending on their loyalty. But loyalties change, as do the characters' personae, and before the conflict between the Daggers and the government is resolved, personal conflicts have taken center stage.

The finale, shot in a clearing in the woods as a snow storm blows in, is elegaic. The film's latent tragedy comes to the fore, and the characters make their final decisions about where to stand. This resolution takes place in a world drained of vibrant color, a black-and-white world at the end.

Exquisitely shot and edited, *House of Flying Daggers* is not as emotionally resonant as Zhang's earlier films. But it captures something true about three-sided-love and leaves the viewer with a lingering melancholy that's not unpleasant. Cinematically and aurally without peer, this may be the year's most physically beautiful film shot primarily in nature.

Playing now at Cinema World, the film receives my highest recommendations. **EW**



Mei (Zhang Ziyi) dances the challenging Echo Game.

BAI XIAO YAN, SONY PICTURES CLASSICS, 2004.

is a martial arts battle set amid a giant bamboo forest. Here Zhang manages to outdo the fabulous fighting scene from *Crouching Tiger*, or at least give it competition. In this spectacular sequences, Mei and Lin, who have developed a surprisingly close relationship after a really

dancer in the Peony Pavilion, a local brothel, and Leo is a savvy provincial official. He challenges Mei to the game because he wants an excuse to arrest her. He believes she belongs to a secret underground organization called the "House of Flying Daggers."

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