



Gong Li and Chow Yun Fat in *Curse of the Golden Flower*

Kicking and Scheming

Palace intrigue in the Late Tang Dynasty

CURSE OF THE GOLDEN FLOWER: Directed by Zhang Yimou. Written by Zhang Yimou, Wu Nan and Bian Zhihong. Cinematography, Zhao Xiaoding. Production design, Huo Tingxiao. Costumes, Yee Chung Man. Starring Gong Li, Chow Yun Fat and Jay Chou. Sony Pictures Classics, 2006. R. 114 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

In the last few years, Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou has focused mainly on the making of action epics, with the exception of the quiet, intimate *Riding Alone for*

Thousands of Miles (2006). In 2003's *Hero* and 2004's *House of Flying Daggers*, he offered grand, sweeping tales stunningly photographed and rich with breathtaking fight sequences. *Curse of the Golden Flower*, his latest, combines the intimate family focus of *Riding* and the dramatic hues of *Daggers* and *Hero*, but what results is a blinding assault of color, spectacle and melodrama that reaches for classic drama but falls short of the mark. As

The New York Times said, the effect is one of “operatic delirium.”

Though the film feels so fable-like that the time period is almost irrelevant, *Curse* is set in the Late Tang Dynasty, circa 928 AD. It opens with a surprisingly entrancing, gracefully choreographed piece: the awakening of the palace. Servants move in unison though the lavish dwelling of red walls, colored glass pillars, billowing curtains and golden lighting. Rows of beautiful women kneel before their colleagues, tying their sashes; at a cue, each pair changes places. These scenes serve to make the isolation of the royal family stronger: Among all these people, the Empress (Gong Li) and her three sons, stepson Wan (Liu Ye), warrior Jai (Jay Chou) and blandly smiling Yu (Qin Junjie), seem astonishingly alone.

At the film's outset, the Emperor (Chow Yun Fat) is on his way home, though he delays for a night at an inn. A dazzling indoor fight between the Emperor and second son Jai serves to remind the young man that what his father does not give him, he cannot take. This rule extends to the Empress, who is afflicted with a serious illness. Every two hours, a bitter medicine is served to her; distaste is clear on Gong Li's imperious, stunning face.

The plot of *Curse of the Golden Flower* is a knot of palace intrigue: murder, incest, mysterious black-clad spies, the Chysanthemum Festival and a play (or two) for the Emperor's throne. Motive, however, is rather murky, and to enjoy the film for the

spectacle it is, it's best to simply go along with the turns of loyalty and tangled connections, savoring the detailed costumes and beautifully turned-out sets. The palace seems made of curtains, screens and decorative doors that offer only the illusion of privacy — a parallel for the illusion of individual power that each member of the family clings to. But all power is the Emperor's. When his black-clad soldiers swoop down upon a remote building, the effect of the use of black is as dazzling as the perfect formations of the warriors. Later, in a messy, massive battle at the palace, gold-clad soldiers find themselves up against a wall of silver and black. The battle rages on, but the fighting between nameless, faceless and clearly computer-enhanced armies quickly becomes tedious.

But even before the mostly anonymous battle, *Curse of the Golden Flower* begins to push the viewer out of the story. As the characters scheme against one another, their interactions begin to feel tonally repetitive, thick with the effect of emotional isolation but nonetheless unsympathetic. Of the actors, only Gong Li shines. Decked out in an unbearable amount of gold, she swoops through the palace's corridors, working to keep her bejeweled head held high. But even her driving passions are somewhat obscured. Despite Gong Li's effort and a nicely taut turn from Chow Yun Fat, *Curse of the Golden Flower* seems to start in the middle of a story that had a more interesting beginning than end. **EW**

Curse of the Golden Flower opens Friday, Jan. 12 at the Bijou

movie clips

OPENING OR RETURNING:

Alpha Dog: Justin Timberlake is among the ensemble cast in Nick Cassavetes' new film, which follows L.A. teens who impulsively kidnap a younger boy who begins to enjoy himself with his captors. R. Cinemark. **Arthur and the Invisibles:** In this animated feature, 10-year-old Arthur goes in search of a magical land after finding a note left by his grandfather. Directed by Luc Besson (*The Fifth Element*). PG. Cinemark.

Best of the Eugene Film Festival: Selected documentaries, short features and experimental works from the first Eugene Film Festival. 7 pm Jan. 14, DIVA. \$5, \$3 stu., member.

Curse of the Golden Flower: The latest from director Zhang Yimou (*Hero*) is an opulent spectacle of court intrigue. Gong Li stars as a troubled empress, Chow Yun Fat her equally conniving husband. Overflows with lavish sets and costumes, but feels hollow in the end. R. Bijou. Cinemark. **See review this issue.**

Dauria: Part one of a chronicle of the Russian experience during WWI's eve and leading up to the October 1919 revolution. In Russian with English subtitles. 7 pm Jan. 16, 111 Pacific, UO. Free.

Déjà Vu: This Jerry Bruckheimer-produced, Tony Scott-directed thriller has something to do with traveling four days back in the future to stop a boat exploding. Or maybe it's just *looking* four days back. Clever preview, either way. Stars Denzel Washington and Val Kilmer. PG-13. Movies 12.

Dil Se (From the Heart): An Indian news radio producer falls for a mysterious woman who rejects him, only to reappear, with a secret, when he agrees to marry another woman. 6 pm Jan. 17, Room 240-A, McKenzie Hall, UO. Free.

Dreamgirls: The much-buzzed-about musical from director Bill Condon (*Kinsey*) stars Beyonce, Jamie Foxx, Eddie Murphy and the said-to-be transcendent Jennifer Hudson in the story of a girl group's rise, loosely based on the story of the Supremes. PG13. Cinema World. Cinemark.

First Emperor: See New York's Metropolitan Opera live via satellite. 10:30 am Jan. 13, Cinemark. \$18.

Flushed Away: A pampered pet mouse (Hugh Jackman) finds himself, after a trip down the drain, in London's bustling rodent underground. With Kate Winslet and Ian McKellen. PG. Movies 12.

Fly Fishing Film Tour 2007: Two hours' worth of "fish porn" shot in Chile, Argentina, Mexico, New Zealand and the U.S. 7 pm Jan. 16, EMU Ballroom, UO. \$12.

Freedom Writers: Hilary Swank stars as a real-life teacher who made a difference in an inner-city high school through an ambitious writing project. PG13. Cinema World. Cinemark.

Harsh Times: Christian Bale stars as an ex-Army ranger who, after failing to find a job with the LAPD, slips into an old life of crime and violence. With Eva Longoria and Freddy Rodriguez, and directed by the writer of *Training Day*. R. Movies 12.

I Won't Drown On That Levee and You Ain't Gonna Break My Back: 30-minute documentary focusing on the evacuation of Orleans Parish Prison, the "Greyhound Jail" inside New Orleans' Greyhound station and the criminalization of survivors of Hurricane Katrina. Part of the UO's Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration. 6 pm Jan. 18, Walnut Room, EMU, UO. Free.

Kicking Bird: Portland filmmaker Kelley Baker's work is the story of Martin "Bird" Johnson, a 17-year-old high school kid who runs. When he outruns the entire cross country team, the coach starts to see Bird as a ticket to a better job. 7 pm Jan. 12, DIVA, with reception to follow. \$5.

OpenLens Film Festival: DIVA's third annual festival, Jan. 12-14, features 13 juried screenings, the Eugene premiere of *Kicking Bird* (above), workshops and more. diva-media.proscenia.net Short films and videos screen at 7 pm and 9:20 pm Jan. 13 and 1 pm Jan. 14. \$5, \$3 stu., member.

Painted Veil, The: Edward Norton and Naomi Watts star in the third film adaptation of W. Somerset

Maugham's novel about an English socialite and the doctor she marries, who takes her to a Chinese village afflicted with cholera. "Let it sweep you away," said *Rolling Stone*. PG13. Bijou.

Peppermint Candy: Like *Memento*, this South Korean drama runs backward, exploring the history of a bitter businessman who throws himself in front of a train. In Korean with English subtitles. 7 pm Jan. 18, Int'l Resource Center, EMU, UO. Free.

Primeval: If you'd like to know what the terrible serial killer — still at large to this day! — is in this horror thriller, check out the imdb.com page, which explains a lot. Plot? Some journalists go to Africa to capture something murderous and mysterious. Based on a true story. Yep. R. Cinema World. Cinemark.

Slaughterhouse-Five: 1972 adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut's novel about Billie Pilgrim, a man "unstuck in time" who lives in three eras at once. 7 pm Jan. 12, Unity of the Valley. Free.

Slingshot, The: A young boy's coming of age amidst anti-Semitism, socialism and sexual awakening. In Swedish with English subtitles. R. 7 pm Jan. 12, 221 McKenzie Hall, UO. Free.

Stomp the Yard: A troubled street dancer from L.A. finds himself a hot commodity among the step dancing teams of two fraternities at a university in Atlanta. PG13. Cinemark.

Stranger Than Fiction: Harold Crick (Will Ferrell) begins to hear a voice (Emma Thompson) narrating his life — and he doesn't like where the story's going. Directed by Marc Forster's (*Finding Neverland*). PG-13. Movies 12. ★★☆☆☆ (11/16/06)

Take Care of My Cat: In a port city, five female friends struggle to stay close after high school. In Korean with English subtitles. 7 pm Jan. 11, Int'l Resource Center, EMU, UO. Free.

Films open the Friday following EW publication date unless otherwise noted. See archived reviews at www.eugeneweekly.com

CONTINUING:

Blood Diamond: Leonardo DiCaprio, Djimon Hounsou and Jennifer Connelly star in Edward Zwick's (*Glory*) film about diamond mining in Sierra Leone in the 1990s. R. Cinemark. ★★☆☆☆ (12/21/06) **Borat:** Sacha Baron Cohen (of "Da Ali G Show") plays the title character, a Kazakhstani reporter creating a documentary while road-tripping across the U.S. The subtitle, "Cultural Learnings of American for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan," ought to tell you something. R. Bijou LateNite, Movies 12. ★★☆☆☆ (11/9/06)

Charlotte's Web: Dakota Fanning plays Fern, the little girl who loves her pig Wilbur (voice of Dominic Scott Kay) more than anything. Julia Roberts voices Charlotte the spider, who helps Wilbur escape his fate. G. Cinemark.

Children of Men: Clive Owen and Julianne Moore star in this highly praised adaptation of P.D. James' novel, which envisions a troubled near future where no more children are being conceived. Directed by Alfonso Cuarón (*Y tu mamá también*). R. Cinema World. Cinemark. **See review this issue.**

Code Name: The Cleaner: Cedric the Entertainer becomes convinced he's an undercover agent for the CIA. With Lucy Liu and Nicollette Sheridan. PG13. Cinemark.

Employee of the Month: Dane Cook and Dax Shepard are two slacker clerks working to become the employee of the month in hopes of getting in Jessica Simpson's pants. Ah, cinematic brilliance. PG13. Movies 12.

Eragon: Adaptation of young novelist Christopher Paolini's first thick tome stars John Malkovich as an apparently campy evil king. Newcomer Edward Speelers plays the title character, who bonds with a dragon named Saphira and, um, saves the world? Or at least the kingdom. Just a guess. PG13. Cinemark.

Good Shepherd, The: Robert DeNiro heads back behind the camera to direct a story about the birth of the CIA, starring Matt Damon as

one of the agency's founders and Angelina Jolie as his frustrated wife. R. Cinema World. Cinemark. ★★☆☆☆ (12/28/06) **Guardian, The:** A hotshot young Coast Guard rescue swimmer (Ashton Kutcher) learns how to be a real hero from a retired swimmer who lost his team in an accident (Kevin Costner). PG13. Movies 12. **Happy N'Ever After:** Sigourney Weaver, voicing an evil queen who ruins Fairy Tale Land, faces off against unlikely resistance leader Sarah Michelle Gellar in this painfully punctuated tale. PG. Cinema World. Cinemark.

Happy Feet: Warner Bros. chases some *March of the Penguins* dough with this animated film, starring Elijah Wood as a cute lil' guy in search of his soul mate. (OK, so they were working on this one first. Still.) With Robin Williams, Hugh Jackman, Nicole Kidman. PG. Cinemark.

Holiday, The: Man-troubled Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet swap houses for Christmas break in the new film from Nancy Meyers (*Something's Gotta Give*) — and naturally, each finds a new feller (Jude Law and Jack Black) on the other's home turf. PG13. Cinema World. Cinemark.

Marie Antoinette: Sofia Coppola's third movie follows Marie Antoinette (Kirsten Dunst), who became the queen of France as a teenager. The film is said to be a confection, a romp, anachronistically set to '80s New Romantic tunes and with some actors using their own accents. PG13. Movies 12. ★★☆☆☆ (10/26/06) **Night at the Museum:** When down-on-his-luck Larry (Ben Stiller) gets a job as the night guard at a museum, he sure doesn't expect the exhibits to come alive at night. There's something very *Jumanji* about this. PG. Cinema World. Cinemark.

Open Season: Sony breaks into the animation game with the story of a clueless grizzly bear (Martin Lawrence) whose friend Elliot (Ashton Kutcher) lures him into the wild life. PG. Movies 12.

Prestige, The: Two magicians (Christian Bale, Hugh Jackman) see

their slight friendship turn to rivalry in Christopher Nolan's (*Batman Begins*) enthralling film. Competition grows as the men do, each trying to outdo the other's performance. With Scarlett Johansson, Michael Caine and David Bowie. PG13. Movies 12. ★★☆☆☆ (10/26/06)

Pursuit of Happyness, The: Will Smith stars as a down-on-his-luck father who strives to make it as a stockbroker while facing eviction and raising his son (Smith's real-life son Jaden). PG13. Cinema World. Cinemark.

Queen, The: Stephen Frears' movie about the shifting desires and threats of Britain's public and the differences in Tony Blair's (Michael Sheen) and Queen Elizabeth II's (Helen Mirren) responses to the death of Princess Diana is a grand, usually subtle fiction that gets at a lot of truth. PG13. Bijou. ★★☆☆☆ (11/30/06)

Santa Clause 3, The: Santa (Tim Allen) faces off against Jack Frost (Martin Short), who's trying to take over Christmas. G. Movies 12.

Saw 3: There's something about a doctor who has to keep scary clown-faced villain Jigsaw alive and a former victim working on a plot of his own, but this moneymaking B-movie franchise doesn't need us to tell you it's nasty, scary and gory. R. Movies 12.

Shut Up & Sing: Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck's documentary look at the unexpected turn the Dixie Chicks' career took in 2003 is engrossing on all the right levels, turning an observant eye on the complicated intersection of art and politics while leaving room for the group's personal stories. R. Bijou. ★★☆☆☆ (12/21/06)

We Are Marshall: Matthew McConaughey and Matthew Fox (*Lost*) play two coaches trying to revive the Marshall College football team following a horrifying crash that killed most of the previous team and staff. Oddly, this based-on-a-true-story flick is directed by McG (*Charlie's Angels*). PG. Cinemark.