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Feature

The Man Who Deserved a Slap on the Face

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Recently, renowned screenwriter-director Ivy Ho became the first guest of the Hong Kong Film Archive's 'Movie Talk' series. She is on record as considering Jean-Pierre Melville's *Léon Morin, Priest* (1961), one of the films screened in this series, to be the most touching film about forbidden love. Appropriately, another film with this theme shown was *July Rhapsody* (2002), a film Ho scripted for director Ann Hui. While the two films have a spiritual connection, this is not a remake in the vein of Gus Van Sant's *Psycho* (1998), nor is it a poor imitation of a composite of films Brian de Palma is noted for directing. Rather, some images and ideas must have been ingrained in Ho's mind when she viewed Melville's film and after she became involved in filmmaking as a scriptwriter, they influenced her work. Over the years she has revealed the deep devotion of a film aficionado.

Melville's original intent in making *Léon Morin, Priest* was to reflect the lives of civilians in a small town during World War II when France was first occupied by troops from Italy and then Germany. However, the film project morphed into a more than three-hour-long epic before he eliminated most French Resistance sequences and concentrated on the spiritual wrestling between Léon Morin, a Catholic priest, and Barny, a young widow. In so doing, Melville actually brought a refreshing perspective to films of this genre. A perfect example of this is his inverted dichotomic depiction of a Nazi officer behaving humanely as he befriends Barny's little daughter and an American soldier making aggressive sexual overtures to Barny. The film provides a psychological metaphor of a painful page in French history through Barny's 'invasion' by God. Not only do her political beliefs waver, but the void in her lonely heart becomes filled by a clergyman and she never knows peace again.

With *July Rhapsody*'s beginnings set in July 2001, Ivy Ho, like Melville, is attempting to find meaning in history. Four years earlier, Hong Kong had been turned over to China and by 2001 the dust seemed to have settled. However, when Ho's script calls for protagonist Lam Yiu-kwok to hold a copy of Ray Huang's *1587, A Year of No Significance* (first published in 1981), she is making a statement. While a number of historians believe that the year 1587 was insignificant in Chinese history, Huang takes an opposing stance and examines how a number of seemingly irrelevant incidents occurring that year led to the demise of the Ming dynasty. Ho seems to be treating the year 2001 in Hong Kong's history with a similar slant. During a class lecture, Lam brings up the names Anson Chan and Tung Chee-hwa. However, he

doesn't mention that Chan, former Chief Secretary for Administration in Hong Kong, was forced to resign from her post in 2001 because she frequently opposed Beijing's interference in Hong Kong affairs during Chris Patten's days and because she disagreed with Tung over the appointment of officials. The discouraging political climate is reflected by Lam's psychological state when later in the film he is overcome by feelings of bewilderment and exasperation. In contrast, Ho infers that relations between the people of Mainland China and Hong Kong have progressed from estranged to close. When Lam took his female classmate to Shenzhen in an abortion attempt in 1979, an ironic twist on the 2001 decision by the Court of Final Appeal which confirmed the right of abode to Chinese citizens born in Hong Kong regardless of the Hong Kong immigration status of their parents, a decision which has led to Chinese women coming to the S.A.R. (North America as well) to give birth to their children, the atmosphere was tense, as evidenced by a Communist Party slogan on the red banner hanging outside the hospital. When Lam returns in 2001, Shenzhen has been transformed into a friendly paradise of dazzling lights and alcoholic delights. His carefully-guarded wall between himself and his students in Hong Kong is aborted when he takes Wu Choi-lam, a student who has a crush on him, to Shenzhen to see how the chimera plays out.

Early in the film, Priest Léon Morin says to Barny, 'What good are words? God, first and foremost, is an experimental, individual reality, different for each of us. And incommunicable.' Be that as it may, the most fascinating feature of Melville's film is indeed the words, the verbal arguments, that pass between Morin and Barny. They debate all the way from the confessional to the presbytery and one never tires of listening to them. In conversation, religion being the dominating topic, they are well-matched as Barny is inquisitive and Morin expert in theology. You can't help but admire Morin's immense erudition as he copiously quotes authoritative works and can easily assess the worth of an author. The interchange between Lam and Wu pales by comparison. At first their exchanges, though not profound, are evenly matched with neither side yielding, but as they let their guards down, talk abates and becomes even less consequential, much like what happens with many old couples. Scriptwriter Ho was so captivated by Léon Morin's bookishness that when she created Lam's character for *July Rhapsody*, she couldn't help making him a bookworm. Lam is able to discuss the literary works of Mencius, Li Bai and Su Shi from ancient times as well as the 20th century's Lu Xun and Ah Cheng. Yet, Lam's teaching ability would only score a grade of 60 because throughout the film he is unable to stimulate Wu's literary potential. Nevertheless, Ho apparently intends him to be an adequate instructor because in the sequence where teacher Shing lies in bed dying, Lam, his wife and son recite in succession Su Shi's *First Rhapsody on Red Cliff.* The scene may seem a little

melodramatic, not to mention unrealistic, but Ho is symbolically charging the Lam family the mission of continuing the Chinese literary tradition.

It doesn't matter to Jean-Paul Belmondo whether someone considers him to be a handsome swan or an ugly duckling; to paraphrase a well-known cliché, he's his own priest. He leers at Barny's toenails, playfully aims his index finger at her nose, and even physically brushes her aside. His spirited and at times unconventional behaviour compelled Ho to watch the film again and again. Not all French films have had this effect on Ho. When you read her film essay on the prankster Alphonse in Truffaut's film *Day for Night* (1973), you can sense that she's gnashing her teeth as she relates that 'this guy is unprofessional, temperamental, abuses his power, requites kindness with enmity, has his own way, absent-mindedly deserts his duty and is always up to some mischief.'[1] In her words, he 'deserves a slap on the face'. Interestingly, Ho scripts the character Lam in *July Rhapsody* with a mental attitude that comes closer to that of Alphonse than Léon Morin. Lam learns that Wu has a crush on him, but all he can muster is a feeble, 'I worry about you…' as he falls into the trap he had been trying desperately to avoid. He has his own way, absent-mindedly deserts his duty and is always up to some mischief (sounds familiar?). In order to hold the attention of his students, his lectures involving ancient Chinese texts are laced with teenage slang, understandable and not cause for criticism. However, during the middle of the night when, in bed with his wife, he hints at how she should behave (abusing his power?), he can't help but use the same narrative style, annoying her and generating the response, 'If you want to say something to me, why don't you be more direct?' When his wife is pursued by a former suitor and is stressed by the encounter, Lam not only doesn't attempt to comfort her, but he displays a mixture of jealousy and resentment (temperamental, just like that prankster). Later, after his wife resolves the emotional disturbance, she attempts to express her feelings to Lam and he responds with a sarcastic attitude. For such a shallow, uncaring man, shouldn't he also deserve a slap on the face? Perhaps Ho was just being realistic in creating Lam as he is, for in an environment such as Hong Kong's it wouldn't be easy to contain a wild horse like Léon Morin.

A subtle link between *Léon Morin, Priest* and *July Rhapsody* is the suspense both directors maintain with regard to the emotions of the two male protagonists. Barny asks Morin, 'If you were a Protestant priest, would you marry me?' He angrily buries the axe in a log and departs without answering. Later, when Barny attempts to touch his hand, he recoils as if he had just experienced an electric shock and admonishes Barny for behaving like Eve. Yet, if he indeed has no emotions or feelings for her, why does he deliberately walk by Barny in the church and let his surplice brush her cheek? And why does he take an excessively long votive candle to Barny's house?

Similarly, Lam in *July Rhapsody* is an emotional enigma. He warns Wu not to follow him all the time, but nevertheless goes out on a date with her. And to add further mystery to the relationship, when Lam and Wu miss the last train of the day to Hong Kong, they have to spend the night in Shenzhen, yet all we see on the screen is the sign of a hostel, followed by a cut to Lam and then a close-up of Wu before a medium shot of Lam walking past the camera lens and then the room door slowly closing… Becoming involved in an illicit game, is there the possibility that teacher Lam can't resist temptation and takes a bite of the forbidden fruit? Ho collaborates with director Hui to keep the audience guessing. It seems that she has not only learned from Melville, but has herself become a master.

Note

[1] Ivy Ho, 'A Slap on the Face – *Day for Night*', Liang Liang & Chan Pak-sang (eds), *Forever Truffaut (1932–1984)*, Hong Kong: City Entertainment, 2005, p 84 (in Chinese).

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