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ENTERTAINMENT

Movies: New York Film Festival 2013 #1 -- Japan And China Step Up

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LIKE FATHER LIKE SON *** out of ****

A TOUCH OF SIN ** 1/2 out of ****

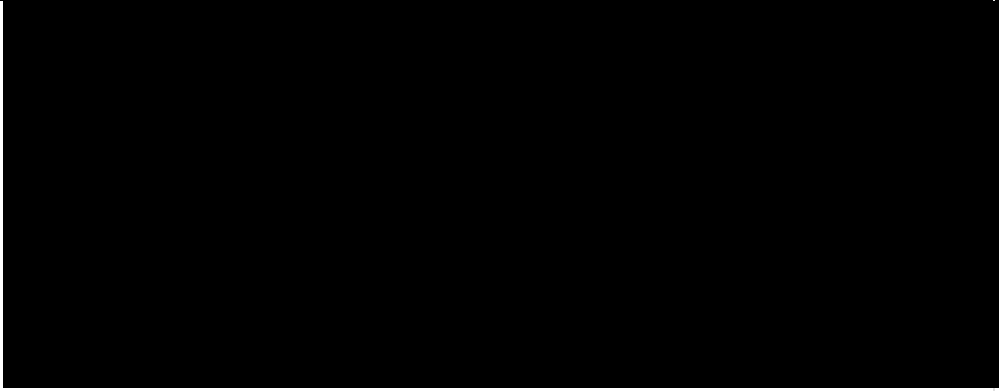
The **New York Film Festival** opens on September 27 with a screening of the Tom Hanks Oscar-hopeful *Captain Phillips*. But for the press it starts now with early morning screenings most every day for the next three weeks. As usual, the NYFF has cherry picked some of the most acclaimed movies that have debuted at other festivals around the world, as well as supporting longtime favorites. Several major Oscar contenders -- like the aforementioned *Captain Phillips*, the folk music film *Inside Llewyn Davis* and the acclaimed *12 Years A Slave* -- are all eagerly waited.

Film buffs will also savor the art house hopefuls that may never gain a huge wide audience but hope to attain the even more enduring trait of greatness. Then there's *Blue Is The Warmest Color*, the top prize winner at Cannes which may do a little bit of both. The festival is filled with some dauntingly long fare -- a four hour miniseries about the Prague Spring, a four hour+ take on *Crime and Punishment*, a four hour look at Berkeley and how a university is run and a relatively brisk three hour and 38 minute film by Claude Lanzmann on two key figures in the Holocaust. I'm looking forward to them -- I just wish they didn't sometimes start the screenings at 9 am! If you read that list and get excited like I do, then NYFF is for you. Here are my impressions of the first two films I saw.

LIKE FATHER LIKE SON *** out of ****

Japanese director Hirokazu Koreeda has been a favorite of mine since I caught *Nobody Knows* at Cannes in 2004. (Hey, I spent a lot of money going to the Cannes Film Festival for more than a decade; I'm going to milk that for all its worth.) Other films like *After Life*, *I Wish* and *Still Walking* contribute to an impressive body of work. So does his new movie which is typically quiet, observant and filled with some excellent performances from child actors.

The story is cliched, really. A wealthy couple with a six year old boy is seen going about their daily lives. The father Nonomiya (Masaharu Fukuyama) is a driven, very successful businessman who expects no less from his child. Classical piano lessons are never to be shirked; if the father can take a little time off from work on Sunday, it's a special treat. Their apartment feels more like a hotel room than a home. But make no mistake. His focus on hard work is well meant and mother Midori (Ono Machiko) is there for a warmer touch. Their lives are deftly established and then upended when hospital officials call to say their son was switched at birth with another little boy.



The results are perhaps predictable. Their biological son is living with a family that is relatively poor but boisterous and happy. Hospital officials say in cases like this the children are virtually always switched back but the families hesitate. They circle each other, trade the boys for weekend sleepovers, grapple with new ways of raising kids (our protagonists are horrified when their son comes back with a very minor scrape from a playground) and so on. Will Nonomiya in particular become a better father with this second chance? Does he love his son only because his son is his blood or because they've shared a life together for six years? Will they raise both boys? Or will the other family?

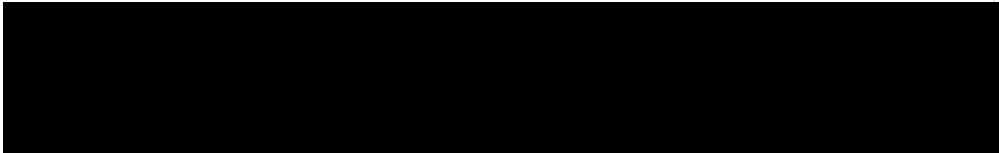
I might have mapped out these changes myself, but Koreeda keeps it fresh by staying observant and quiet, letting the drama of what's going on unfold naturally. The cast is suitably restrained despite the high melodrama taking place. You wrestle with nature versus nurture and what it means to be a parent while watching this movie -- familiar stuff all. But it's to the film's credit that I was genuinely unsure of what would happen. And the familiar aspects (such as Nonomiya loosening up) weren't overdone. Not his best but another solid film for Koreeda.

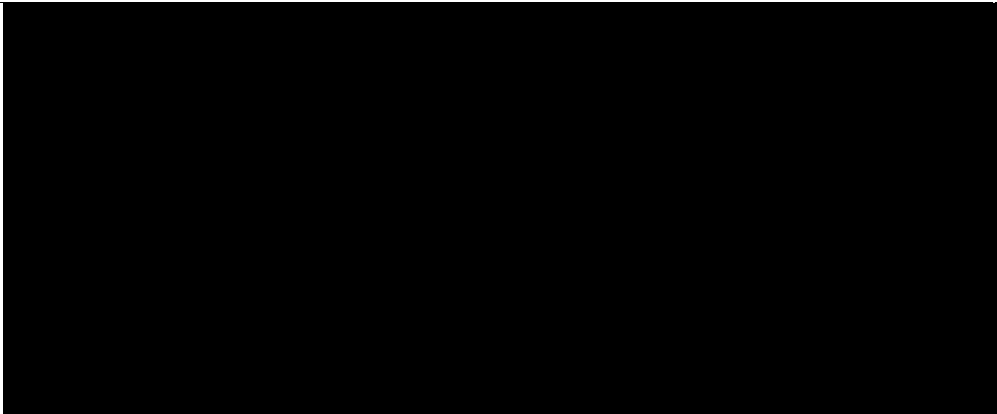
A TOUCH OF SIN ** 1/2 out of ****

Zhangke Jia is another major talent, one of the most important and bold figures in Chinese cinema. His masterpiece is *Platform*, but he's also delivered unconventional films like *The World* and a distinctive documentary about Shanghai called *I Wish I Knew* that I loved but which has never really made it the US. After years as an underground filmmaker, Jia has made films through official channels though HOW they get approved and made must remain a mystery, one that deepens with his new and critical look at the effect of corruption, the sex trade and indifferent factories on the Chinese people.

The film covers four separate storylines though blessedly they don't artificially converge a la *Babel*. The first and strongest story revolves around Dahai (Wu Jiang). This hilariously pushy fellow is outraged over the corruption in his village, a stain that spreads from the powerful man who flies in on a jet down to a local accountant and village chief. Jiang was discovered by the great director Zhang Yimou for *To Live* (1994) and he commands the screen with ease. The entire cast is strong but his presence is so warm and boisterous and fresh I wish the entire movie had stayed with him. Dahai is mocked and humiliated at every turn and finally snaps in an orgy of violence that quickly becomes the movie's signature. The people of China do not suffer silently in these films; they lash out at others and themselves again and again.

The second story involves a mysterious young man; we don't discover until the end of his tale exactly how he makes his living but it's clearly a violent one on the edge of society. Still, while you wouldn't mess with him, it's notable that he doesn't seem like a threat to others. It's a petty squabble during a gambling session at his local village on New Year's that turns brutal. He just watches impassively.





A third story centers on the mistress of a businessman and is the film's subtlest example of dehumanization. She works in a hotel/massage parlor/brothel but it's the wife of the businessman that first assaults her and calls her a whore. ("Did your mother give birth to you just so you could seduce my husband?" demands the woman as she and some men viciously beat the girl.) The violence throughout has been shocking but here in the film's major visual misstep, the mistress turns into a warrior, fighting back in the style of a samurai that seems silly and undercuts the movie's realism.

The fourth story involves a hapless kid working in a factory who takes a job at a high end hotel/brothel, falls in love with a female coworker and generally feels helpless as his life narrows down to a miserable job on yet another factory floor.

Throughout the film is well acted and shot and certainly the stories are filled with incident by his standards. For Jia, this is practically *Star Wars* -- it's far more action packed and accessible to a wide audience than his earlier films. Unfortunately, it stumbles too often. The violence in the third tale is too stylish and the violence in the fourth tale is unearned. How much more wrenching it would be to see that young guy trapped on a factory floor, doomed like Sisyphus to the endless task of trying to get by.

Jia is too good to miss anything he makes and I won't be upset if this gains him fans in the West. But far subtler, more ambitious work awaits anyone who plunges into his catalog of films. Still, *A Touch Of Sin* is a remarkably corrosive look at the price society pays for corruption, dehumanization and other sins. And while others may profit, the film's final shot holds the audience -- all of us -- responsible for allowing it to continue. The tales apply to much of the world, not just China, but still you're surprised it got made. Maybe the authorities in China didn't watch it till the end? Or maybe they thought Jia was somehow blaming the peasants rather than rallying them to change the system? However it got made and released, *A Touch Of Sin* is out in the world and you should never underestimate the power of art.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided a press pass to the early screenings of the NNYFF with the understanding that he will be reviewing them.

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