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By Sophie Braccini



Image provided

This month, the International Film Showcase presents a beautiful and serious film from Italy. Set mostly on a working-class island in the Venetian Laguna, it depicts the collision of two worlds in crisis: that of an illegal Chinese immigrant who has to work to regain her freedom, and that of an old fisherman whose world is changing too fast.

The internal beauty of the two main characters is mirrored by the nostalgic beauty of the island; they try to reach each other through poetry to alleviate their suffering, but conflicting social groups interfere.

Shun Li and the Poet is the tale of the tender friendship between Shun Li, a Chinese immigrant who works as a waitress in a tavern to save enough money for her son to join her in Italy, and Bepi, called "the poet" by his friends, an aging Croatian fisherman who refuses to leave the place where he's lived for 30 years to go live with his son.

The movie shows how these two try to bridge their differences, understand each other, and share a little bit of humanity. "I wanted to present two things in this movie," explained Italian Director Andrea Segre for the Cannes Film Festival in 2010, "first translate realistically and metaphorically the relationship between people of different cultural background, and also speak of two places that are very important for me and very representative of today's Italy: the multi-ethnic suburbs of Rome and Venice, two Italian regions that recently became immigration regions because of economic growth."

The scenes in the little "osteria" where Shun Li works are realistic social depictions, the characters are picturesque. The way some scenes are filmed makes it vivid and life-like with no romanticism. Alternating with these are

scenes of poetry and beauty.

The setting, on the island of Chioggia, gives Segre the opportunity to create images of serene beauty. Tao Zhao's face (Shun Li) fits perfectly with the calm and luminosity of the Venetian lagoon. Segre filmed her with the sunset's light on her face, revealing the porcelain beauty of this fine actress. Also interlaced in the film is the recurrent and metaphorical image of water and the little lights that Shun Li floats for the Chinese poet Qu Yuan.

Of particular note, too, is the soundtrack. Very modern, creative and melodic, the music fits the narrative well and helps to convey the emotion of the film.

The movie is an aesthetic treat as well as a cultural lesson on a changing Europe.

Shun Li and the Poet will be playing at the Orinda Theatre through the month of January. For information, call (925) 254-9060.

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