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VENICE

LUST, CAUTION

(SE, JIE)

(HONG KONG-U.S.-CHINA)

A Focus Features release (in U.S.) of a Haishang Films presentation, in association with Focus Features, River Road Entertainment, Sil-Metropole Organisation, Shanghai Film Group Corp. (International sales: Focus Features Intl., London.) Produced by Bill Kong, Ang Lee, James Schamus. Executive producers, Ren Zhonglun, Darren Shaw. Co-producers, Doris Tse, David Lee.

Directed by Ang Lee. Screenplay, Wang Hui-ling, James Schamus, based on the short story by Eileen Chang. Camera (Deluxe color), Rodrigo Prieto; editor, Tim Squyres; music, Alexandre Desplat; production designer, Pan Lai; supervising art director, Olympic Lau; costume designer, Pan; sound (Dolby Digital/DTS Digital), Philip Stockton, Eugene Gearty, Drew Kunin; assistant director, Rosanna Ng; casting, Ng. **Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (competing)**, Aug. 29, 2007. (Also in Toronto Film Festival — Special Presentations.) MPAA Rating: NC-17. Running time: 157 MIN.

With: Tony Leung Chiu-wai, Tang Wei, Joan Chen, Wang Leehom, Anupam Kher, Chu Tsz-ying.

(Mandarin, Cantonese, Shanghainese, English, Japanese dialogue)

By DEREK ELLEY

Too much caution and too little lust squeeze much of the dramatic juice out of Ang Lee's "Lust, Caution," a 2½-hour period drama that's a long haul for relatively few returns. Adapted from a short story by the late Eileen Chang, tale of a patriotic student — who's willing bait in a plot to assassinate a high-up Chinese collaborator in Japanese-held WWII Shanghai — is an immaculately played but largely bloodless melodrama which takes an hour-and-a-half to even start revving up its motor.

A handful of explicit sex scenes (in the final act) have earned pic an NC-17 rating in the U.S., where it goes out in limited release Sept. 28. But beyond the notoriety of a Chinese-language picture with full-frontal female nudity, pic lacks the deep-churning emotional currents that drove Lee's "Brokeback Mountain" and his best other works. B.O. in the West looks to be modest, once the initial ballyhoo has died down.

Story opens in Japanese-occupied Shanghai in 1942, at the home of Yee (Hong Kong's Tony Leung Chiu-wai), head of the secret service of the collaborationist Chinese government, and his wife (Joan Chen). One of Mrs. Yee's mahjong partners, swapping gossip over the tiles, is the



Tony Leung Chiu-wai has a dangerous liaison with Tang Wei in Ang Lee's "Lust, Caution," adapted from the short story by Eileen Chang.

much younger Mrs. Mak (Tang Wei), the half-Cantonese, half-Shanghainese wife of a businessman who was recently in Hong Kong.

As Yee returns from work and passes by the mahjong table, it's clear there's something between him and Mak, though neither one lets their facade slip. Later, Mak makes a coded phone call to Kuang Yumin (U.S.-born pop star Wang Leehom), who says "the operation can start."

After this lengthy 15-minute intro, largely occupied by idle chatter around the mahjong table, the film flashes back four years to Hong Kong to show who Mak really is: Wang Jiazhi, a first-year university student whose family fled Hong Kong for the U.K. Through her friend Lai (Chu Tsz-ying), Wang falls in with a patriotic, anti-Japanese group that is mounting a play to fund their activities.

Leader of the group is the passionate Kuang, who hears that Yee, a high-ranking collaborator with the Japanese, is in Hong Kong on a recruitment mission. Kuang hatches a plan in which Wang plays the fictional Mrs. Mak and insinuates herself into Mrs. Yee's confidence. But Mrs. Yee's cool, wily husband, though attracted to Wang, slips through the net.

Cut to Shanghai, 1941 — a year before the opening timeframe — and it's round two between Yee and Wang. After Wang is rehired by the resistance to continue her Mrs. Mak role, this time their liaison is far more full-on, and as lust raises its sometimes violent head, it looks as if caution may be thrown to the wind by one or both parties.

Both Leung and newcomer Tang — whose characters are far more charismatic and attractive than in Chang's original short story — do strike some sparks, especially in the

sex scenes, which are very bold by Chinese standards. (A tamer version will reportedly be released in mainland China.) But for most of the film, the two dance around each other in conversations that don't have much electricity or sense of repressed passion — and vitally, no sense of the real danger that Wang is courting in the game of cat-and-mouse.

Moments of either grim wit (as in the messy stabbing of a blackmailing traitor) or sly comedy (Wang getting rid of her virginity to further the cause) occasionally vary pic's tone but don't bolster the underlying drama.

Wartime Shanghai was far more realistically drawn in Lou Ye's Zhang Ziyi starrer "Purple Butterfly," which also conveyed a stronger sense of resistance and collaborationist politics. (Here, Yee's work, which involves interrogation and torture, is never shown.) Lee's '40s Shanghai, though immaculately costumed, has a standard backlot look; the Hong Kong sequences, largely shot in Malaysia, are much more flavorful.

Tang, a Beijing drama student who's previously played in some TV series, holds her own against Hong Kong vet Leung, who suggests the cold calculation of his character without ever going much deeper. Fellow vet Chen doesn't get many chances beyond the mahjong table, while Wang Leehom, as the leader of the resistance cell, is just OK, sans much personality.

Alexandre Desplat's music injects some badly needed emotion and drama at certain points, while lensing by Rodrigo Prieto has little of the variety and atmosphere he's demonstrated on recent assignments like "Babel," "Alexander" and Lee's "Brokeback Mountain."