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A Good One From China



the pressures of the period — the years 1935 to 1950 — drive them to survive in opposite manners. Chun Hua, the heroine, believes in an art that challenges audiences, having use for only as much money as she needs to survive, and thus becomes a disciple of Karl Marx. Yue-hong, her dearest friend, co-star and antagonist, thinks they should sell out, dicker for the high-class patrons and flashy costumes. Their friendship goes into dramatic eclipse, but every event unfolds objectively, the thematic and historic implications so obvious that the filmmakers don't bother to stress them. Mao's revolution is allowed to be seen as an event like any other — albeit a very positive one in relation to the corrupt world the two women must survive in, but an event that comes *from* that world nevertheless.

Now and then there's a line of banner dialogue that would unscroll better than a fortune cookie — "Let us remold ourselves earnestly and always perform revolutionary operas" was my own favorite — but the effect is more charming than preachy, since the words are spoken so much from within a living character. It may be this very relaxed honesty that prompted Mao to have the film banned during the cultural revolution. In any case, amid all those lurid minks, double-breasted suits and cigarettes of the Chinese '40s (this film is immaculate in its sense of period, down to the least stick of furniture), the idealistic Chun Hua, with her dark intensity and gray overcoat, becomes not a symbol of purity but a real person seeking purity. And while American moviegoers will probably emerge no more sold on Mao than they were going in, they will surely be able to better grasp with their emotions what exactly his appeal was.

(Unfortunately, this was the only film available before press time. There are five others, including one with a particularly gorgeous title: *Second Spring Mirroring the Moon*. The films will all be shown over two consecutive nights, Friday, November 6, and Saturday, November 7, 8 p.m. both nights, with a noon show on Saturday.)■

by F.X. Feeney

Stage Sisters is a lively, fascinating and surprisingly undogmatic film that kicks off a brief weekend series at the L.A. County Museum: *Films from the People's Republic of China*. I'd gone mostly out of

liberal guilt, to see "what's happening there" and what-not, dreading that the film was going to be one big tractor opera — a living rendition of those propaganda paintings showing clusters of workers, peasants and children gazing vacantly upward with apple-cheeked smiles of fanatic optimism. *Stage Sisters* couldn't be less like that. There's a dominant political

theme, clearly, but director Xie Jin places the bulk of his artistic faith in naturalism — the live, authentic ways in which people simply interact.

The story centers on two young actresses, struggling to pay off a huge and unjust debt in the waning years of China's old order. They rise to stardom in the classical opera world of Shanghai, but