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Mixed-up teens: *Lisa Yang and Zhang Zhen get together in* A Brighter Summer Day.

Unforgettable

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Taiwanese masterwork makes its way to PFA. By Alvin Lu

IF WATCHING foreign films is a form of sightseeing, those who wish to take the trip to early-'60s Taipei Saturday night at the Pacific Film Archive with Edward Yang's 1991 *A Brighter Summer Day* are recommended to bring bottled water and a change of clothing. This rarely screened, uncut version from the revelatory "Edward Yang: A New Day in Taiwan" series that's currently making a U.S. tour clocks in at 240 minutes, a full-on four hours. (A less-sensical three-hour version was the one in international distribution, to the extent that the film was distributed.)

It'll be worth it. Opportunities to see recent groundbreaking works of cinema are rare and, like watching any of the great long movies, nothing is quite like the experience of this one. You're enveloped in a world, in this case (if you're not from Yang's neighborhood) one at once impenetrably foreign and specific (Taipei's Chien Chung high school, circa 1961) and weirdly familiar ('50s American pop culture). Even those who grew up intimately in the mainlander soldiers' villages *(jun chun)* depicted in the film should find Yang's modernist skewing of the details disorienting. Yang's built a total inner world and projected it, accomplishing with recent historical materials what's more often done through fantasy or remote history. The attention here to re-creating a lost world — not only through the design of the homes, the wearing of haircuts and school uniforms, and the ubiquitous clopping of wooden clogs but also in the rendition of a sun-dazed tropical atmosphere — makes something like *Titanic* look like camcorder video. This is one of the most intensely imagined films ever made, meant to be seen on the big screen. Every frame looks hand tinted.

The plot revolves around a murder, which ends the movie, and a swords-and-sticks-fought gang war, which occurs pretty much on the dot at the two-hour point. These two violent ruptures hold the rest — teen romance and sexual experimentation, gang intrigue, pop culture idolatry, family hysterics, political oppression — in place; if Yang is presenting us a world, it's still one from an adolescent perspective. Xiao Si'r ("little four"), played by Zhang Zhen (who, considerably matured and buffed, appears as Tony Leung's Taiwanese soccer buddy in *Happy Together*), is a well-intentioned, but then again not particularly conscientious, kid who's trying to test his way up from the problem-kid night school to the more prestigious day school. His attraction to Ming (Lisa Yang) leads him down a path to the local gang overlord–in–hiding, Honey, and to a conflicted friendship with the local spoiled rich kid, the son of a General Ma. While the focus is on Si'r, the real breathtaking sights are in the meticulously rendered backdrops he takes us through: a film studio, a shooting range, the Japanese-style colonial homes the displaced families live in, a book stall–populated street intersection, neighborhood shops, a basketball court, a doctor's office, and of course the school itself, whose columns and arches lend it a Gothic atmosphere probably not intended by the humorless school officials.

Yang spent an obsessive three years in preparation for the film, and the design and the look of it bear out this obsession. Everything looks as if it were exactly in the place he wanted it to be. Instead of a sense of perfection rising from the screen, though, there's a sense of the uncanny, of a butterfly pinned to a board. The narrative design of the film is circular — objects that catch the eye get passed around and reappear — and oddly maddening.

Self-enclosing circles in Yang's work suggest not only a personal tic but a social condition. Yang's background as one of the mainlander refugees whose Kuomintang representatives took over Taiwan in 1947 following civil-war defeat is never more fully explored in his films than here. The circular design reflects the literally enclosed world of mainlander soldiers' villages — hardly any Taiwanese *(Tai-yu)* is spoken in the film, and any native Taiwanese characters who appear are peripheral. (This is not so much censorship, as with earlier Taiwanese films, as a reflection of the segregation of the times.) Contrasted with the work of Hou Hsiao-hsien, whose films can tend toward documentary (particularly in his politicized retelling of Taiwanese history in 1993's *The Puppetmaster*) and reflect a vital community dynamic, Yang's seems isolated and unnatural, more magical than neo-realism.

Released in 1991, *Brighter Summer Day* appeared at the height of the pro-independence movement in Taiwan and now in 1998 exists in a kind of political no-man's-land, much like the displaced families dramatized in the film. There is, then, a deep sadness and a sense of this historical shift in *Brighter Summer Day*, as if Yang recognized a culture and people about to be erased by history and circumstance and did all he could to preserve a single image of it. In a director's note to the film, Yang dedicates the film to his father: "I hope they, the forgotten, can be made unforgettable." ■

'A Brighter Summer Day.' *Sat/21, 7 p.m., Pacific Film Archive, 2625 Durant, Berk. $6. (510) 642-1412.*