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**CLASS ACT** Zhang Yimou makes a triumphant return with *Not One Less*.

## *Not One Less*

Dir. Zhang Yimou. 1999. G.  
106mins. In Mandarin, with  
subtitles. Wei Minzhi, Zhang Huike.

**Z**hang Yimou and Gong Li were once the most potent director-actress team since Von Sternberg met Dietrich, so film buffs everywhere were disheartened when the pair broke up during the production of *Shanghai Triad*, vowing never to work together again. Worries about Zhang's future output escalated when *Keep Cool*, the director's first post-Gong effort, failed to land a U.S. distributor. But as it turns out, there was nothing to fear: While not quite in the same league as masterpieces like *Red Sorghum* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, his latest proves conclusively that while Zhang may have lost his muse, he hasn't lost his touch.

Actually, *Not One Less* is in many respects a superior remake of the most oddball Zhang-Gong picture, 1992's *The Story of Qiu Ju*. In that film, the protagonist travels from a remote village to the big city in an obsessive quest to receive an official apology for an injury to her husband. In *Less*, a teenage substitute teacher (Wei), who's been promised a bonus if all of the regular teacher's students are still present when he returns, travels from a remote

village to the big city in an obsessive quest to locate one of the children. At first, her motivation seems strictly mercenary; once the amount of money she's spent tracking the kid comfortably exceeds the amount she's been promised for his continued attendance, however, it's fairly clear that a different set of emotions has taken precedence.

An earthy ode to sheer determination, *Less* often feels more typical of Iranian cinema than Chinese, though its sense of humor is spikier than the standard Kiarostami or Makhmalbaf flick. For example, a recurring bit in which Wei turns her financial dilemmas into an impromptu lesson for her class grows more hilarious as it becomes apparent that instructor and pupils are equally confounded by the requisite math. Unfortunately, the picture eventually grows rather gooey, and the final reel turns into a tract supporting increased education spending. Still, compared with the lifeless costume epics coming from the mainland lately—notably the recent *The Emperor and the Assassin*, starring Gong Li—*Less* is the proverbial breath of fresh air, and one of the finest films that the new year has offered us yet. (Opens Fri; see Index for venues. See also Interview.)—Mike D'Angelo