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XIAO WU P.88

(HONG KONG-CHINESE)

A Hu Tong Communications (Hong Kong)/Radiant Advertising Co. (Fenyang) production. Produced by Li Kit Ming, Jia Zhang Ke.

Directed, written by Jia Zhang Ke. Camera (color), Yu Lik Wai; editor/sound, Lin Xiao Ling; production design, Liang Jing Dong. Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (Forum), Feb. 18, 1998. Running time: 113 MIN.

With: Wang Hong Wei, Hao Hong Jian, Zu Bai Tao.

VAKITI 3/2-3/8/98

By DAVID STRATTON

An impressive debut for writer-director Jia Zhang Ke, this low-budgeter, shot on 16mm in the director's hometown and using non-pro actors, has an endearing freshness and insight. A must for Asian sections at fests in the coming months, this modest but revealing pic could also nab air time on quality tube broadcasts.

Very much in the style of a free-wheeling Yank indie, Jia has gone out into the streets and into the houses of the small town of Fenyang to film the story of a likable rogue. The title character is a hustler and a thief; short in stature and wearing thick, heavy-rimmed spectacles, he looks a bit like an amiable owl, but he's tenacious, pugnacious and a leading member of the town's criminal fraternity. Not that stealing from shops or pickpocketing is such a serious crime, in Xiao Wu's view. But he's under pressure because the authorities have announced a crackdown on just the sort of action in which he's involved.

At the outset, he's miffed because his best friend, a former petty thief who now is a semi-respectable "entrepreneur," has failed to invite him to his wedding. The insult is compounded when his wedding gift of cash is rudely returned.

A visit to a karaoke bar-cum-brothel is designed to make Xiao Wu forget his troubles, though at first he's not happy with Mei Mei, the girl who's assigned to him, because she refuses to sing or dance. But soon they start a relationship — and Xiao Wu prepares for the occasion with a visit to a public bathhouse (a scene notable for its full frontal male nudity, something extremely rare in Chinese cinema until now).

Once Mei Mei has agreed to be his girl, Xiao Wu gets himself a pager, so she can be in contact with him at any time, and buys a ring. But the flighty young woman departs unexpectedly with some clients, and Xiao Wu is alone again. A visit to his peasant parents in a nearby village leads to a serious family row, and his virtual expulsion from his childhood home.

Jia's film succeeds not only because of the unaffected, naturalistic performances from its cast of non-professionals, but also because of the minutely observed details of small-town life.

Location shooting is good, and the film is pretty polished given the obviously minuscule budget. Pacing is, however, a little on the leisurely side.