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A-1

(A-1 TAUTIU)

(HONG KONG)

A Panorama Distribution Co. release of a Go Film Distribution, Panorama Entertainment Co., Sil-Metropole Organization, People's Prods. presentation of a People's Prods. production. Produced by Allan Fung. Executive producers, Gordon Chan, Fruit Chan, Jimmy Law, Stephen Lam.

Directed, written by Gordon Chan, Chung Kai-cheong. Camera (color), Nau Yee-shun; editor, Cheung Ka-fai; music, Johnny Njo; art director, Ringo Fung; costume designer, Angelo Law. Reviewed on videodisc, London, March 13, 2005. (**In Hong Kong Film Festival — Hong Kong Panorama.**) Running time: 104 MIN.

With: Anthony Wong, Angelica Lee, Edison Chen, Tony Leung Ka-fai, Eric Kot, Lam Ka-tung, Lo Wai-luk, Joel Chan, Sophie Wong, Miao Changjun, Cara Chan, Dante Lam.

(Cantonese dialogue)

By DEREK ELLEY

If further proof were needed that Anthony Wong is now Hong Kong's most versatile character actor, it's there in spades in "A-1," a quirky mystery-drama that's all in the performances. As a debt collector who teams with a young female journo to unravel a potential scandal, Wong, 44, also gets a run for his money from 29-year-old, up-and-coming actress Angelica Lee ("The Eye"), creating a remarkable chemistry that prevents the ultra-offhand pic from evaporating in its laidback style. Fests with Asia-savvy audiences should give this a whirl as a connoisseur item.

Turn to next page

Varied, 4/18/05-4/24/05, pp 29-30

Continued from previous page

In a way similar to alternative crimers of '70s Hollywood ("Busting," "The Late Show") but comparatively new to Hong Kong cinema, the main story is hardly the thing. In fact, when the film feels it has to deliver a plot of sorts in the final few reels, it's at its most conventional. Despite a strong supporting cast, led by Tony Leung Ka-fai and offbeat comic Eric Kot, pic failed to hook local auds last fall.

Wong plays Fei, a cop-turned-debt collector who works with a regular partner, the more colorful Ma (Kot). One of their clients is Ling (Lee), a slightly spacey reporter who owes the bank HK\$93,000 (\$12,000) but is in the dumps over the death of her ex-b.f., Peter, a colleague at work.

Fei goes easy on Ling, and after bumping into her on several occasions starts to suspect Peter's death in a car crash wasn't an accident. In a beautifully played scene in a coffee bar that sums up the movie's casual atmosphere, she finally asks Fei and Ma to help her solve the mystery. It's a path that leads to her omniscient editor (Leung), who knows more than he's letting on, as well as her paper's powerful publisher and one of Fei's old cop buddies.

For much of the time, the main cast just moseys around everyday locations talking and looking at each other, or tangentially touching on emotional undercurrents. At other times, a small incident is turned into a showcase for one of the actors, as when Fei — also in debt, to a triad — scares off hired muscle with a display of super-cool.

Surprise of the pic is the way in which Lee is able to match the more experienced Wong in their many moments hanging out together, nowhere more than in a nighttime rooftop scene where the two tiptoe around their growing mutual attraction. In a role that could have been played way ditzier, but instead is given an offbeat internal strength, Lee gives growing proof (as in the recent "20 30 40") of a real actress behind her hypnotic looks.

Only weak link in the cast is juve star Edison Chen, as Ling's puppyish colleague, who's completely outclassed by all the minimalist acting around him. Tech package is fine, and helming by the experienced Gordon Chan and scripter-turned-director Chung Kai-cheong is unobtrusive, in service of the cast. Original Chinese title means "A-1 Headline," referring to the front page of a newspaper's first section.



Angelica Lee and Anthony Wong star in Hong Kong thriller "A-1," written and helmed by Gordon Chan and Chung Kai-cheong.