

Film Review Chinese Girl Sold Into Slavery in Old West By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Lalu Nathoy, or China Polly, as she is nicknamed in "1,000 Pieces of Gold," overcomes almost as many perils as Pauline in the cool, clear-eyed historical drama that opens today at the Angelika Film Center.

As an adolescent in famine-stricken northern China in the 1880's, she is pulled out of bed one morning by her father and summarily sold to a marriage broker, who ships her across the Pacific in chains. In San Francisco, she is auctioned off to an agent (Dennis Dun) for Hong King (Michael Paul Chan), a rapaciously greedy saloonkeeper in the gold-rush mining village of Warren's Diggins, Idaho.

When Lulu violently resists Hong King's attempts to turn her into a prostitute, he forces her to be his slave. But through her toughness, pluck, intelligence and charm and the sympathetic intercession of Hong King's white business partner, Charlie Bemis (Chris Cooper), who wins her in a poker game, she pulls herself out of a seemingly hopeless situation. Eventually, she comes to love Charlie.

"1,000 Pieces of Gold," which is based on a true story recounted in Ruthanne Lum McCunn's 1981 book of the same name, has enough plot for three movies. But because its events are so concisely distilled, the film still has enough room left over to ground Lulu's experience securely in the context of a little-known aspect of American pioneer history.

With the discovery of gold in the West, a wave of Chinese laborers arrived to work on the railroads and in the mines. Although welcomed at first, they were soon persecuted by white laborers motivated by a combination of racism and resentment of their industriousness and their willingness to work for very low wages. Denied naturalization and the right to vote, they were eventually excluded from the United States by the Chinese Restriction Act, which Congress passed in 1882 and which ended the country's free immigration policy. Not the least of the dangers Lulu survives is a white lynching party that drives all the Chinese laborers out of Warren's Diggins.

"1,000 Pieces of Gold," directed by Nancy Kelly, is so straightforward in its storytelling and unfussy in its cinematography that at times it has almost a documentary feel. Although the film contains many scenes that could have been directed for excruciating suspense or for tears, its tone remains objective to the point of detachment. That tone is set by Rosalind Chao's impressive, understated portrayal of Lulu. From the opening scenes, in which she is tearfully carted off from her family while her father turns his back and puts his hands over his ears to block out her cries, the character is revealed as a figure in a larger historical landscape.

Even in moments of terrible anguish, Ms. Chao projects the character's steely will. Threatened with rape, she wields a knife with a determination so ferocious that her captor realizes she is unsuited for prostitution. Even the least sympathetic characters are revealed as vulnerable, multi-dimensional people buffeted by forces beyond their control. The fiendish Hong King and his money-making fever are seen as just an extension of the surrounding entrepreneurial fever.

Lulu's rescuer is himself far from unblemished. A survivor of Andersonville prison, he is a hard-drinking, war-weary lost soul who swallows his feelings. Mr. Cooper's gruff, reticent performance undercuts the romantic aura of savior that clings to the most heroic secondary role in this well-made old-fashioned movie. 1,000 Pieces of Gold Directed by Nancy Kelly; written by Anne Makepeace.

Questions: *Try to answer them for yourself before going on to the answer sheet below, which in fact you may not completely agree with.*

1. Name the three main characters in the film. Who are they? List their main characteristics (adjective work) either by finding these attributes directly in the text or by inferring from their actions.
2. List in six or seven short sentences the main plot(story) line.
3. What historical background to the film is cited in the review?
4. What is the reviewer's opinion of the film?

2. Answer Sheet

Answer Sheet

Lalu (China Polly): Young Chinese girl
intelligent
charming
brave, plucky
steely will, determined
tough

Hong King: Saloonkeeper, Pimp
greedy
rapacious
fiendish, devilish
vulnerable (buffeted by forces...)

Charlie Beamis: Gambler, Business partner
hard drinking
war weary
lost soul
swallows his feelings (shy, reticent)

Plot (story-line)

Lalu is an adolescent in famine-stricken China. She's pulled out of bed by her father and sold to a marriage broker. Polly is shipped to San Francisco in chains. Then she's taken to a frontier town in Idaho where Hong King attempts to turn her into a prostitute. Polly resists and is forced to work for Hong King (as his slave). She is won in a poker game by Charlie. She ultimately pulls herself out of a seemingly hopeless situation. Eventually, she grows to love Charlie.

(The problem of recounting a plot is to not tell too much, so as not to bore your audience, but also not to say so little that you catch no one's interest)

Background

The film, being an historical romance, is grounded in the history of the mass migration of Chinese laborers to the US in the 1880's. It uses the legal and social difficulties which these immigrants had to endure, etc.

(Depending on what your dealing with the background could be historical, as above; or biographical, one of the characters, or a discussion of the writer's/director's bio or ideas.)

Critical Opinion

a well-made old-fashioned film; straight forward story telling; concise distillment of events; unfussy cinematography; has a documentary feel; characters are multi-dimensional; possesses an objective, somewhat detached tone; excellent understated acting which serves to undercut the romanticism.

MOVIES

OPENING

I Called Him Morgan Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening March 24. (In limited release.) • **Life A** science-fiction film, directed by Daniel Espinosa, about a Martian organism that gets loose on a spaceship and threatens to conquer Earth. Starring Ryan Reynolds, Rebecca Ferguson, and Jake Gyllenhaal. Opening March 24. (In wide release.)

NOW PLAYING

Frantz

The new film from François Ozon takes place just after the First World War, and the action is shared between enemies; the first part is set in a small German town, and the second is centered in Paris. Reconciliation, however well meant, turns out to be an elusive ideal. Paula Beer, whose performance gains momentum as the plot unfolds, plays Anna, who lost her fiancé, Frantz (Anton von Lucke), in the conflict; she still lives with his parents, the Hoffmeisters (Ernst Stötzner and Marie Gruber). They are visited by Adrien Rivoire (Pierre Niney), a tremulous Frenchman, who says that he was a friend of Frantz, and whose recollections bring solace to the bereaved. As Ozon's admirers will know, however, from "Under the Sand" (2000) and "In the House" (2012), mourners can surprise both themselves and others, and the telling of tales can lead one down curious paths. Thus, when Anna travels to a still hostile France, all that she believes begins to fall apart. On the surface, the film—shot in black and white, with short surges of color—is placid and polite, yet what stirs beneath feels unhappy and unresolved. In French and German.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 3/20/17.) (In limited release.)

Get Out

A young white woman named Rose (Allison Williams) takes Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), her black boyfriend, to meet her parents for the first time. They live, in some style, in the country, and Chris, though an unruffled soul, feels a mild trepidation. But Rose's father (Bradley Whitford) and mother (Catherine Keener), liberal to a fault, offer a warm welcome; if anything, it is their African-American staff—Walter (Marcus Henderson) and Georgina (Betty Gabriel)—who make Chris feel more uneasy. A party for friends and family, the day after the couple's arrival, deepens his suspicion that something is awry, and the final third of the film bursts into open hostility and dread. The writer and director is Jordan Peele, making his feature-film debut, and the result feels inflammatory to an astounding degree. If the awkward social comedy of the early scenes winds up as a flat-out horror movie, that, we feel, is because Peele finds the state of race relations so horrific—irreparably so—that no other reaction will suffice. Kaluuya makes a likable hero, for whom we heartily root.—A.L. (3/6/17) (In wide release.)

I Called Him Morgan

One of the traumas of modern music was the death of the trumpeter Lee Morgan, at the age of thirty-three, when he was shot in a Lower East Side jazz club, in 1972, by his common-law wife, Helen

Morgan. Kasper Collin's documentary is centered on the sole recorded interview granted by Helen, in 1996, shortly before her death. Her story, as presented by Collin, has a vast historical dimension, focussing on her life in New York in the nineteen-fifties, where she defied the limited opportunities for black women and turned her midtown apartment into a freestyle artistic salon. Interviews with Lee Morgan's great musical cohorts, such as Wayne Shorter and Albert (Tootie) Heath, reveal the jazz circuit's high-risk behind-the-scenes activities, involving fast cars, sharp clothes, sexual conquests, and, often, drugs. When Lee's career was derailed by his heroin addiction, Helen took him under her wing and checked him into rehab. When he came out clean, they lived together as a couple and she managed his triumphant comeback; then he left her for another woman, and tragedy ensued. With an insightful blend of interviews and music, archival footage and photographs, Collin anchors this resonant double portrait in its subjects' enduringly influential artistic scene and era.—Richard Brody (In limited release.)

Kong: Skull Island

An unmapped and storm-girdled island, deep in the South Pacific, is too much to resist. Hence the expeditionary force that is dispatched there—set in motion by a scientist (John Goodman), guided by a British tracker (Tom Hiddleston), and caught on film by a dauntless photographer (Brie Larson). Military muscle is provided by a squad of American troops, newly released from the toils of the Vietnam War and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Preston Packard (Samuel L. Jackson), who is already itching for another conflict. The fun starts—and it starts with admirable speed—when the island proves to be far from uninhabited. In residence is a U.S. pilot (John C. Reilly), who's been stranded there for almost thirty years and has never heard of the Cold War ("They take the summers off?"); a bunch of prehistoric nasties with a grievance; and a monkey the size of the Chrysler Building, whom we seem to have met somewhere before. The director of this heady nonsense is Jordan Vogt-Roberts, who sees no reason that "Apocalypse Now" should not be mashed up with monster flicks; the result, apart from a stale patch in the middle, is dished up with energy and verve.—A.L. (3/13/17) (In wide release.)

Personal Shopper

Kristen Stewart, who has made a wise habit of turning to distinctive directors, colludes again with Olivier Assayas. In "Clouds of Sils Maria" (2014), she played the assistant to a celebrated actress; here she takes a similar but grimmer role as Maureen, the dogsbody who runs around buying clothes and bags for a celebrity (Nora von Waldstätten) of no perceptible talent. Any social satire, though, is lightly handled, for Assayas has other zones of obsession and frustration to explore. Maureen is psychic, and desperate to hear from her twin brother, who succumbed to a heart condition from which she also suffers. In that spirit, the movie becomes a ghost story, with the heroine prowling a vacant house in search of the dead; as if that were not enough, death then shows up uninvited, in the shape of a savage murder. Some audiences will doubtless be baffled and annoyed by this mixing of genres and tones, yet Assayas and

Stewart just about hold things together, and there are thrilling stretches—Maureen exchanging texts with an unknown presence who could be a killer, a stalker, or a phantom soul—when the movie stops your breath.—A.L. (3/20/17) (In limited release.)

Raw

Julia Ducournau's movie tells the tale of Justine (Garance Marillier), who is joining her older sister Alexia (Ella Rumpf) at veterinary school. Justine arrives there as a hardworking student, a strict vegetarian, and a blushing timid soul; what we observe, in stages, is the process by which she turns into a lusty carnivore on the rampage. The trigger is the hazing ritual to which she and other novices must submit, which involves, among other delights, a shower of blood and the chomping of a raw rabbit kidney—sufficient to give Justine a craving for flesh of other kinds. She is not alone in her appetites, we learn, and Ducournau does not shy away from detailing the tasting menu that follows. Viewers with nervous stomachs should stay well clear, yet the film, however lurid, is memorable less for its capacity to disgust than for its portrayal of sisterly bonding, and for exploring the extent to which the characters—not merely the young ones, as a late revelation suggests—are both liberated and caged by bodily wants. In French.—A.L. (3/13/17) (In limited release.)

Song to Song

In this romantic drama, set in and around the Austin music scene, Terrence Malick places the transcendental lyricism of his later films on sharply mapped emotional terrain. It's a story of love skewed by ambition. Rooney Mara plays Faye, a young musician who falls into a relationship with a record-company mogul (Michael Fassbender) who can boost her career. Then she starts seeing another musician (Ryan Gosling), who also gets pulled into the impresario's orbit. The shifting triangle à la "Jules and Jim" is twisted by business conflicts and other players, including a waitress (Natalie Portman), a socialite (Cate Blanchett), and an artist (Bérénice Marlohe). Meanwhile, Patti Smith, playing herself, is the voice of conscience and steadfast purpose, in art and life alike. Without sacrificing any of the breathless ecstasy of his urgent, fluid, seemingly borderless images (shot by Emmanuel Lubezki), Malick girds them with a framework of bruising entanglements and bitter realizations, family history and stifled dreams. His sense of wonder at the joy of music and the power of love is also a mournful vision of paradise lost.—R.B. (In limited release.)

A Taste of Honey

When the blowsy Helen (Dora Bryan) says she never knew that her misfit daughter, Jo (Rita Tushingham), was talented, Jo retorts, "I'm not just talented, I'm genius." There is a touch of genius to Shelagh Delaney's 1958 Manchester-set play about Jo's inchoate yearnings, her brief interracial romance, and the safe zone she creates with her only friend, a tender gay man (Murray Melvin). Jo is a flighty character with a bitter earthy streak, and her conflicting energies—expressed in sometimes edgy, sometimes fanciful dialogue—make this a near-classic of postadolescent confusion and longing. The director, Tony Richardson (who co-wrote the screenplay with Delaney), didn't find a visual style to match the verve of Delaney's language, but he cast the film superbly, and in the best scenes Walter Lassally's photography and John Addison's score help him achieve the perfect blend of poignancy and insouciance.—Michael Sragow (Film Forum; March 24 and March 28.)