



CHESTER FILM SOCIETY PRESENTS:

THREE TIMES

2005 TAIWAN 116 MINUTES

DIRECTED BY HOU HSIAO-HSIEN

STARRING SHU QI, CHANGE CHEN

For its reticence, its control, its quietism, for its formal daring whose impact is somehow both contained and enhanced by precisely these restraints, and lastly perhaps for its serene mystery, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film deserves to be seen.

It is a movie triptych: three stories from Taiwan, shown out of historical order and spanning the beginning of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. In 1966, Chen, a young guy about to report for military service, moons around a pool-hall and falls in love with May, one of the hostesses. In 1911, a young republican activist, Chang, visits a beautiful courtesan who confides in him about a fellow working girl who is trying to leave the madam's establishment to become the concubine of a local businessman - but needs money to buy out her "contract". Chang gallantly offers to give this other woman the money she needs, apparently as a gesture of friendship to his courtesan - an intervention that is to cause heartbreak. And lastly, in 2005, in modern Taipei, a hip young photographer called Zhen falls in love with Jing, a solo singer with a personal secret.

In each of the three stories, the lead actors are the same: Shu Qi is May, the courtesan and Jing, and Chen Chang is Chen, Chang and Zhen. There are distant thematic resonances between each, relating both to the precariousness of both love and political ideals. These are loosely and un-pedantically expressed. Commentators have placed great emphasis on the political background to Three Times. I personally find the love stories of much greater importance.

The nearest comparison to hand is probably Stephen Daldry's *The Hours*, a tripartite story taken from the Michael Cunningham novel about three different women and Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway*. There was something flashy and exhilarating in that juxtaposition, but a juxtaposition is what it was: the movie insisted on

conventional unity by intercutting the three stories within the narrative; the points of comparison and coincidence were double-underlined, and there was even a little plot twist to justify bringing them together.

Three Times has none of this. The three stories are just presented, one after the other, in a gentle, unemphatic succession. The most striking is unquestionably the second story, the triptych's middle panel, which is made startling by imitating the mannerisms of a silent movie of the time.

It has inter-titles for the dialogue with a discreet piano piece for the soundtrack, yet it is not silent: the courtesan's song is faithfully reproduced. This could have been an affectation, but it is brilliantly appropriate for its theme of love unexpressed, and things unsaid. When Chang buys out his courtesan's friend's position, his gallant but gravely misjudged gesture has the effect of keeping the courtesan imprisoned in her own position (the madame now needing her more than ever) and making her fall deeply in love with him. It is also an indirect and tragically thwarted expression of Chang's own love for her - unthinkable, considering both his position and political ambitions. When the courtesan finally brings herself to ask, with heartbreaking dignity, if Chang "has any plans for her", the effect is unbearably moving.

There are moments of comparable poignancy in the other stories, too, and in each Shu Qi conveys a different kind of vulnerability. Her pool-hall hostess can do hardly more than smile and giggle in the face of her importunate suitor. The singer in the third story has a kind of simmering anger at her own fragility, and her own inability to receive love. Shu Qi's performance is in the first rank. This is connoisseur's cinema - but it's a connoisseurship worth cultivating.

Peter Bradshaw

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PLEASE LEAVE ANY COMMENTS ABOUT THIS FILM ON THE REVERSE OF THIS FORM. MANY THANKS.

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