



THE ASSASSIN

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If *The Assassin* were any more beautiful it could be prosecuted under the dangerous drugs act. Taiwan's Hou Hsiao-Hsien creates images of a narcotic allure even more bewitching than in his *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998). That was the movie that made late-19th-century Chinese brothels look like a hallucinogen addict's vision of paradise.

The new film is a *wuxia* (martial arts) story. You should read a synopsis of the introductory scenes before you see it — a brief one is supplied below — because you'll be knocked off your perch by the rich colours, glittering textures, flaming golds and silvers, jewelled costumes and jaw-dropping, nay jaw-dislocating scenery. And by your intuition, correct, that Hou has researched the hell out of the story's period — he claims to have spent years doing so — distilling it into a heaven for aesthetes and goggles at the gorgeous.

The opacity of the narrative almost seems part of the film's purpose. In late Tang Dynasty China a beautiful assassin, played by Hou regular Shu Qi, is dispatched by her guardian nun to kill a provincial ruler. Mercy intervenes; it's this hit-woman's redemptive foible.

(And her quarry was once her betrothed.) Whereupon we start dreamily to slip time and place. The film's oneiric eye-blinks, some longer than others, include a flashbacked princess singing of a tragic bluebird, horsebacked warriors weaving through spectacular gorges, domestic scenes of an opiate beauty set in royal bedrooms or boudoirs. Human actions are a saga of small, exquisite scratches on the scroll of eternity.

I've seen the film twice and still can't follow every shift of its court intrigues and conspiracy plots. But I'm not sure Hou wants us to. He wants us to feel the enraptured shrug of a secular pantheism at once whole-earth and unearthly. Nature is everywhere in the film. Birdsong and insect noises magically orchestrated on the soundtrack; breeze-blown veils and curtains shimmering in interiors; cloud-girt mountain crags soaring like petrified eagles caught in mid-takeoff. The fight scenes themselves are sparse, vivid, startling, surreally brief. They seem like convulsions of fleeting purpose in a world where the only fixed rule of existence is — indifferent yet majestic — existence itself.

Nigel Andrews, Financial Times

WRITERS: Hsiao-Hsien Hou & others **CINEMATOGRAPHY:** Ping Bin Lee **MUSIC:** Giong Lim
Tian Ji'an Chen Chang | *Nie Yinniang* Qi Shu | *Lady Tian* Yun Zhou | *Mirror Polisher* Satoshi Tsumabuki

VOTING FOR *Court* A12 | B28 | C28 | D6 | E1 | Rating 66% | Attendance 80

Our next screening | **Rams** | Tuesday 10 January 2017. 8.00pm

'...memorable ...for the tragic nobility it finds in sad and silly circumstance...'