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Presents

ZHOU YU'S TRAIN

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Synopsis

Zhou Yu (GONG LI) is an artisan living in Sanming, an industrial town in Northwestern China. Twice a week, she takes the train to rural Chongyang to visit her lover, a shy, handsome poet named Chen Ching (TONY LEUNG KA FAI). Inspired by Zhou's beauty, Chen has crafted a series of poems for her, which has only drawn her closer to this quiet, gentle man. On one trip to see him, she encounters a friendly young veterinarian, Dr. Zhang Jiang (SUN HONG LEI), who tries to purchase one of Zhou's ceramic vases – a gift intended for Chang that she throws to the ground rather than sell to a persistent Zhang. As the shards of the vase shatter on the floor of the train, we see the pieces of Zhou's romantic life with Chen – their first chance encounter at a dance where Chen gives her a beautiful poem before disappearing; her return to Chongyang to pursue him; their hungry lovemaking in the library where Chen works and lives; and the rush of passion as, despite the expense and inconvenience, Zhou returns to the countryside again and again to sate her restless heart. She speaks of selling family heirlooms in order to help Chen publish his poetry, and uses her savings to set up a public reading that no one attends.

By the time she meets Dr. Zhang – an eager suitor younger and much more worldly than the sheltered Chen – Zhou has begun to realize that despite their passion, Chen does not know what kind of future he wants with Zhou. Desperate for proof of her lover's affection, Zhou walks along the rural train tracks searching for a lake that Chen compared her to in his first poem. Zhang, concerned for her safety, tags along, and urges her that whether or not she finds the lake, she must trust the passion in her heart. Although Zhang's intentions are clear, Zhou embraces him as a trusted friend. She remembers her last encounter with Chen – he has decided to take a teaching post in Tibet, effectively putting their relationship on hold. Unbeknownst to Zhou, Chen has lied to her about when he has to leave, and is already far away when she arrives again in Chongyang to see him.

But like the train she continues to ride twice a week, Zhou is inevitably drawn back to Chongyang, to the empty library, her heart frozen as she tries to contemplate her betrayal. At home, she is closer than ever with Zhang, who is now the one who brings her to the train station and picks her up when she returns. Inevitably, Zhang's patience and sincere heart win over Zhou, and they become lovers. In an ironic twist of fate, Zhang one day decides to get on the train to Chongyang to follow Zhou to her lover – the same day Zhou decides to step off the train and give herself to Zhang. In Chongyang, Zhang learns Zhou's secret – Chen Ching, the poet, is far away, nothing more than a memory. Returning to Zhou, he realizes that he will never have her heart, and tearfully lets her go.

In the mountains of Tibet, a young woman named Xiu (also played by Gong Li) arrives. She has fallen in love with Chen Ching through his poems, and has been pursuing him and watching Zhou Yu to understand the inspiration behind the poetry. Chen tells her that Zhou Yu is dead – killed in a bus accident

on her way to Tibet. But Xiu isn't convinced – now, she is the one riding the trains in pursuit of her love, and she can see Zhou Yu riding with her.

ZHOU YU'S TRAIN

Cast

Zhou Yu.....Gong Li
Chen Qing.....Tony Leung Ka Fai
Zhang Qiang.....Honglei Sun

Crew

Director.....Sun Zhou
Executive Producers.....Yang Buting, Zhao Xinxian
Producers.....Huang Jianxin, Sun Zhou, Bill Kong
Screenplay.....Sun Zhou, Bei Cun, Zhang Mei
Cinematography.....Wang Yu
Editor.....William Chang
Production Designer.....Sun Li
Sound.....Wang Xueyi
Original Music.....Shigeru Umebayashi

About the Production

On a passenger train, a beautiful young woman traveling alone carries a handmade ceramic vase, intricately painted by her own hand, a gift for a distant lover. She meets a friendly, handsome young veterinarian, who tries to tell her that she should sell the valuable piece to him, instead of giving it away to her boyfriend for free. Simply to spite the persistent animal doctor, the young woman hurls the vase to the floor of the train, shattering it to pieces.

Thus begins “Zhou Yu’s Train,” a modern tale of love and passion that is as intricate and delicate as the vase Zhou Yu (Gong Li) destroys – and, as directed by the accomplished Sun Zhou, equally as fragmented. Driven by three remarkable performances and a multi-layered narrative structure that reveals the intimate parallels within the folds of a love triangle, “Zhou Yu’s Train” offers unique and poignant insight that audiences all around the world are sure to embrace and remember.

“Some say that love is not about lasting relationships, but about a single moment of togetherness,” says director and co-writer Sun Zhou, who is known to international audiences as the director of 1999’s “Breaking the Silence,” which also starred Gong Li. “I don’t agree...what I’m saying about love, and our idea of love, is that it accompanies us for life. It grows old with us. It will always be with us. I think what’s important is not who we fall in love with, but whether or not you have that feeling inside your heart, that feeling that excites you and controls your life.” To underscore the permanence of love, “Zhou Yu’s Train” shows us Zhou

Yu's emotional journey through two passionate relationships in a non-linear fashion, allowing us to connect the relationships across time and space in a way that gives her experiences unexpected richness and depth.

"'Zhou Yu's Train' is about a woman trying to find herself," clarifies producer Bill Kong. "It's less about people in love, and more about this woman trying to discover in herself why she wants these two men. She represents something very modern in China; not just women's liberation, but about a woman discovering what she could have. She's strong, but very romantic, and is pursuing that truth in her heart."

For Zhou Yu, we can see her emotions initially awakened by Chin Chang, a shy librarian who secretly yearns to be a poet (Tony Leung Ka Fai, a nine-time Hong Kong Film Award nominee and "Best Actor" winner in 1984 and 1993). Sheepishly offering her a poem after watching Zhou Yu dance, Chang is stunned when Zhou Yu visits him on a return trip to Chongyang, a provincial city several hours' train ride from her home in Sanming. His poems linger throughout the soundtrack of the film as the various characters respond to the passion shared by Zhou Yu and Chen Ching. Eventually, Zhou Yu begins selling some of her inherited artifacts to raise the money to publish Ching's poetry, and makes the long visit to see him on the train, twice a week.

It is the visual possibilities of the train that attracted Sun Zhou to the original novel upon which the film was based. "It plays just a small part in the novel," he explains, "but this gave me a strong visual image to express the feelings I have about love. It's like a train – it may not have a final destination,

but there are passengers who will get on and off.” Indeed, it is the motif of the train moving back and forth across the countryside that is reflected in the film’s editing and visual style: we uncover Zhou Yu’s two romances as parallel train tracks that will never meet, linked forever by the body of the woman who rides the train between past and present, memory and reality, passion and sadness. “Running from place to place,” Zhou Yu tells us about her travels, “something is bound to happen.”

As Zhou Yu realizes that the relationship with Chen Ching is beginning to stagnate – he contemplates a teaching assignment in distant Tibet – she meets up with Zhang Jiang (vibrantly brought to life by newcomer Sun Honglei), the young farm animal doctor who takes such an interest in her ceramic vase. In one of the film’s most heartfelt and well-rendered sequences, Zhou Yu departs the train from Sanming to Chongyang on foot to escape Jiang, only to find him following her through the fogged, green countryside. Desperate to find proof of the poet’s love for her, Zhou Yu is determined to locate Xan Hu Lake, which Chang compared her to in his first poem. The heavy mist, the anonymous hills, reveal nothing, leaving Zhou Yu stunned, only to be surprisingly consoled by the pragmatic Jiang: “If the moon can be both round and crescent, then a lake can be empty and full. If it’s in your heart, then it’s real. If it’s not, then it never will be.” Producer Bill Kong calls Sun Honglei’s performance one of the most brilliant surprises of the film: “We expect him to win awards in China,” he enthuses. “Both he and Tony received great notices at the Berlin Film Festival, but Gong Li maybe out-performs them both.”

Back in Sanming, Zhou Yu becomes close friends with Jiang (who clearly admires her even though he admits that he “couldn’t handle” a woman like Zhou Yu). She attempts to preserve her love for Ching – he has taken the job in Tibet without saying goodbye, but she continues to return to his now-empty library in Chongyang. Eventually, she finds a deep but more stable passion with Jiang, although he seems to know that he will never capture her heart the way that Ching did. At this point, late in the movie, the audience begins to realize that there is a fourth figure who has been “watching” the love triangle evolve – a young woman named Xiu, with cropped hair and even more of an independent spirit than Zhou Yu. Xiu has read Ching’s book of poetry (entitled *Zhou Yu’s Train*) and has become obsessed with both lovers, the poet and his muse.

Xiu is also played by Gong Li, even though the role was originally intended to be played by another actress. But director Sun Zhou cast Gong Li in the part in order to draw parallels between the two female characters. “It’s symbolic of the intertwining lives of the characters,” he explains. “Xiu is street-wise, a free-spirit like Zhou Yu, but born under a different star. She is as cool and sophisticated as Zhou Yu is passionate and natural. Xiu helps heighten the sense of fate and lends a mythical quality to the love story.” He also admits that, ultimately, what Xiu knows about Chen Ching and Zhou Yu – and how she factors into the resolution of the story – is open to interpretation. “Chen Ching claims that Zhou Yu and Xiu could only have met in a dream – but is this true? Has the whole love story been imagined by Xiu as she read Ching’s poetry? The

two women are linked, but do they really meet in reality? It's up to the audience to make their own interpretation.”

Working with Gong Li on the four-month long shoot in the fall of 2001 proved to be a special kind of challenge for Sun Zhou. “We were trying to find something new in her, and it was a challenge to find a new perspective on such an experienced actress. But her performance inspired me to constantly develop the character while we were shooting; I was rewriting scenes every day to accommodate what we discovered about the character together. We ended up filming over two hundred scenes. It was like we were on board a non-stop train which would take us all the way to the final destination.”

“For me, film is a place to dream,” concludes Sun Zhou. “Some would think that the character of Zhou Yu is strange, but I think she's perfectly normal. Perhaps modern day people are peculiar, and Zhou Yu is the normal one. She is loyal to herself, very true from her feelings. There's a line at the end of the film – ‘Who can be parted from Zhou Yu?’ I believe everything I want to say is in this line. Zhou Yu is love – can we escape from love? Truth is, if we choose to let things happen, then they will. In time, these things even may become the most significant things in your life.”