

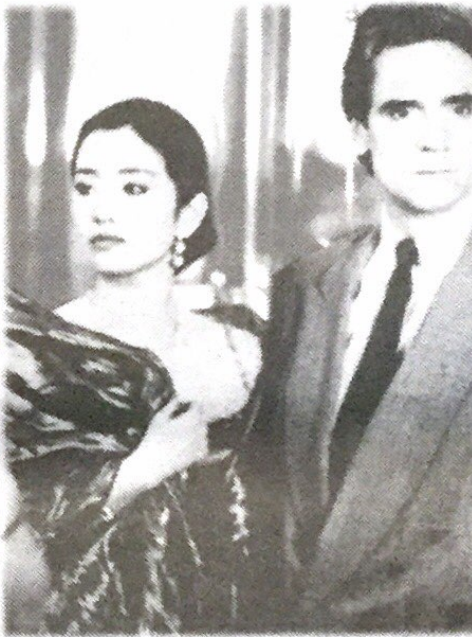
CHINESE BOX
(DIR. WAYNE WANG)

The latest offering from director Wayne Wang (*Joy Luck Club*, *Smoke*) is *Chinese Box*, a film whose title describes not the narrative structure itself but the reciprocal, container-contained relation between the "macro" and "micro" plots: between the real-life social/political/historical background of the last six months of British controlled-Hong Kong, and the interconnected stories of a handful of individuals whose personalities and fates do not merely counterpoint but correspond, in a rather transparent allegory, to the larger events transpiring around them. Your enjoyment of *Chinese Box* inevitably hinges on this relation between levels, since Wang and his screenwriters (Jean-Claude Carrière and Larry Gross) have clearly decided to avoid subtlety in this respect.

John (the terminally romantic Jeremy Irons) is a British journalist, slowly dying of a rare disease — a sort of post-colonial leukemia — and also nursing an all but unrequitable love for Vivian (Asian screen icon Gong Li), a former prostitute from the mainland, turned karaoke bar owner, who returns John's love but cannot marry him because she's set her sights on a member of the new business elite. In a subplot, punky street hustler Jean (action and art film star Maggie Cheung) becomes the focus of John's 11th-hour attempt to get to know the human face he has neglected in his long career covering Hong Kong's politics and economics. The scar on Jean's otherwise

beautiful face is a central symbol of Hong Kong's treatment by its colonial masters: jilted by her British boyfriend, she had tried to kill herself and now survives, like so many others, by doing selling just about anything. The politics of gender and race issue organically from the peculiarities of Hong Kong in transition, a society of colourful contradictions, of extremes of beauty and ugliness, prosperity and poverty. Shot during the actual events leading up to the June 30, 1997 hand-over, in a jittery

Chinese Box



hand-held style, *Chinese Box* achieves a docu-realist effect that is not undermined by the overt allegory at its heart. You might say that its mixture of the "real" and the highly contrived is itself the perfect formal match for Hong Kong as it heads, with the rest of the world, into the next millennium.

-Russ Kilbourn

HAV PLENTY
(DIR. CHRISTOPHER SCOTT CHEROT)

Hav Plenty is the sometimes clever but never original comedy by first time director, writer and star Christopher Scott Cherot. Cherot's examination of the nature of relation-

ships takes more than a page out of Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, complete with asides to the camera and an ending that turns on itself. But it lacks the neurotic charm of Allen's lyrical film. The problem is that Cherot is too busy stroking his own ego to bring us a story or characters that we might actually care about. In his asides to the camera, Cherot is basically pointing to himself, saying: "Look at me, aren't I cunning?" The rest of the characters also spend much of the movie doing the same thing.



Hav Plenty is a "true story" about Cherot's relationship with a woman whose choice of lifestyles is irreconcilable with his own. Cherot plays Lee Plenty, a homeless novelist who's in love with the well-to-do Havilland Savage. She cares about Lee, but she can't get past his poverty. The movie takes a discerning look at the power struggle and game playing that goes on in all social relationships. The lines are delivered in a hyper-aware manner that gives the movie an edgy quality — everyone knows

that what's being spoken isn't what's being said. But Cherot takes the device of self-awareness a step too far. He constantly puts the action on hold to discuss what shot should come next. He lets us know that he's going to do it differently because this isn't a formulaic Hollywood movie, but a true story. Well, it might be true, but neither the story nor the way it's presented is much more gripping than most movies from Tinseltown.

-Poonam Khanna

COUSIN BETTE
(DIR. DES MCANUFF)

Ostensibly based on Balzac's 1846 novel, set in pre-revolutionary

France, veteran theatre director Des McAnuff's adaptation of *Cousin Bette* (of *Le Comedie Humaine*) is for some reason shifted to the period just prior to the *other* French Revolution, in 1848. Perhaps McAnuff, best known for bringing the Who's *Tommy* to the stage, felt that the change would better accommodate the inclusion of songs that wouldn't have made the cut for *Les Miz*. If so, he was wrong. The musical anachronisms are only the most grating in a movie that can't seem to decide whether it's a period comedy or a historical melodrama — a confusion purportedly based in the novel, which hardly seems fair. Elizabeth Shue (burlesque star/courtesan Jenny Cadine), whose aerobicized bum is the most egregious (albeit buffest) anachronism of all, should be banned from period films forever. I can only imagine that newcomer Aden Young got the part as penniless heartthrob sculptor Count Wenceslas Steinbock because Ewan McGregor couldn't do a Polish accent. But it would be churlish to dump on a film without mentioning the redeeming details. The supporting actors (Kelly MacDonald, the schoolgirl in *Trainspotting*, Bob Hoskins and various other British stalwarts) acquit themselves well, often rising above the material, which can't have been difficult. Also, Jessica Lange is well-cast in the title role of an aristocratic family's middle-aged spinster cousin, embittered by the hard life has dealt her, and determined to get even if she can't get her man. Betrayed by everyone, *Cousin Bette* succeeds in gaining vengeance. Who will do the same for Balzac?

-Russ Kilbourn

SMOKE SIGNALS
(DIR. CHRIS EYRE)

In an early scene in *Smoke Signals*, Arnold Joseph (the monolithic Gary Farmer) is driving with his young son Victor through the Coeur