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AS LIFE FLOWS BY -- STORY OF THE PRODIGAL SON CAST IN A MASTERFUL TAPESTRY

By Jessica Thorpe Aug 25, 2000

In an entertainment age in which pyrotechnics and computerized light and magic are often the real attractions (even the venerable Clint Eastwood leans heavily on digital derring-do in "Space Cowboys"), "Shower" is a sparkling deviation from the norm.

This cinematographic pearl from Chinese director Zhang Yang - who was a pioneer in China's underground music video scene - finds aestheticism in the simplicity of its visual execution, the gentle strength of its characters and the lovely metaphor for life that trickles through the story line.

Admittedly, that story line is not unique: loosely, it is about a prodigal son and his homecoming, a story of coming to terms and coming of age. Even the characters are fairly stock: Da Ming is a successful son estranged from his father, Master Liu, who owns and operates a family business, a traditional bath house in Beijing; Er Ming is the mentally challenged younger brother who faithfully helps the father in the bath house; He Zheng is a slacker patron with money troubles; Zhang Jin Hao an employee with marital woes; and Lao Lin and Lao Wu, two grumpy old men - a la the American screen duo Jack Lemmon and the late Walter Matthau.

But from the opening scene - He Zheng in an automated shower that operates like a car wash and suggests the dehumanizing effects of technology - Yang weaves a masterful tapestry of the preservation and passing on of cultural tradition and the integrity of the human spirit. Intimate camera work, soft filtered cinematography and minimal dialogue

heighten the subtle interaction between the players: Er Ming and his father jogging together after a day of caring for patrons; Lao Lin and Lao Wu bickering over whose cricket won their fight; the two brothers watching a nature documentary after their father's unexpected death.

With a droll sense of humor, Yang bridges the often non-negotiable span between custom and contemporary community through repetition of the images of rituals and routines held safe in Master Liu's bath house. With liquid ease, he juxtaposes shots of a transistor radio held to the ear, wooden checkers on playing board and the pouring of tea against icons of modern society - cell phones, electronic massagers and drive-through car washes. Imperceptibly, he deftly seals the circle with flashback tales of the Liu family's affair with bathing, a joyous "Culture Day Celebration" in the park and, ultimately, the urban renewal of the bath house neighborhood to make way for a shopping mall.

The ultimate message is as sweet and refreshing as time spent in Master Liu's bath house; change in life is as constant and necessary as water.

By American standards, the Chinese actors who breathe life into Yang's uplifting "Shower" are each Oscar worthy. Zhu Xu is touching as Master Liu, struggling to understand his older son, devoted to the younger son and deploying physical and spiritual healing with equal aplomb. Pu Cun Xin is moving as the troubled Da Ming who must come to terms with his own destiny and his feelings for his younger brother. But it is Jiang Wu, as the mentally challenged Er Ming, who steals the screen in a poignant performance that rivals Peter Seller's moving portrait of the simple-witted Chauncey Gardner in "Being There," and Tom Hanks' Oscar-winning "Forest Gump."

"Shower" is Yang's second feature film; his first, "Spicy Love Soup," was the first independent Chinese film to achieve domestic box office success. Under Yang's careful direction, the fine ensemble cast embraces and holds the viewer close from the first credit to the last triumphant scene.

SHOWER

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STARRING: Jiang Wu, Pu Cun Xin, Zhu Xu

DIRECTOR: Zhang Yang

RUNNING TIME: 92 minutes

RATING: PG-13 for language and nudity

THE LOWDOWN: The eldest son returns to his family in Beijing only to face the reality that the life he remembers in China is being slowly wiped away by technology