

# 'Lover' offers sex without substance



JOHN MONAGHAN

She leans over the ferry railing, a floppy-brimmed fedora shading her eyes, her mother's oversized dress clinging in the heat of the summer afternoon. From a shiny black limousine, a rich man watches the girl, struck by her innocent beauty, and approaches her shyly and cautiously.

"The Lover," which has plenty of foreplay like this and even more explicit sex, gives us the structure and satisfaction of a porno movie but without the cheap lighting and camera work. I suppose there are worse ways to spend a winter evening than between the sheets in a steamy Saigon bachelor's room.

The film is based on a novel by Marguerite Duras, the popular French writer responsible for, among other things, the screenplay for "Hiroshima, Mon Amour" (1960). But "The Lover" has best-selling and partially autobiographical novel first pub-

lished in 1984, it is amazingly naked. The people populating the film are referred to only by their place in the story, not by name. So the young English girl in 1929 Vietnam is simply The Young Girl. Her lover is The Chinese Man. The impersonality makes the characters and their inability to relate outside the bedroom, but it doesn't help audience's empathy with their situation.

English model-turned-actress Jane March is a bit older than the film's girl of 16 and she plays the part fairly effectively. But in the movies, where a new nymphette sizzles on screen every couple of years or so, she is simply this year's model.

In a film where surface emotion and surface texture is everything, she looks fabulous. So does Tony Leung as the title character, who impresses the girl so much because he has virtually no responsibilities in life except to make love and eventually marry a wealthy Chinese virgin.

Director Jean-Jacques Annaud previously brought us the laughable "The Bear" and has similar trouble here getting expression

from his lead performers. The love scenes are indeed steamy, but there is always the sense of lumbering manipulation, as if he's again trying to move her (here bare) meat into proper position.

The movie does provide some emotional dynamics in a scene where the girl's mother and brother meet the man for dinner and take leaving advantage of his hospitality. They don't approve because he is Chinese; they know that he is more than just a friend. Still, they exercise varying degrees of denial when it comes to stopping the gravy train.

"The Lover" is also beautiful to look at. Cinematographer Robert Frutkin shows us the muddy expanse of the Mekong River during ferry crossings. The scenes in the man's bachelor's room (the place wealthy men take their mistresses) are dimly lit, with bustling peasant shadows cast against wooden blinds. Street noise clatters just outside.

"The Lover" was made by a French director and producer in English for MGM. They have obviously seen the box-office receipts generated from erotic epics like Japan's "In the Realm of the

Senses." Here, they can deliver the goods in a European package without all those annoying subtleties.

At least a quarter of the film (the press kit boasts one-third) is either sex or preparation for sex. There is a detailed depiction of the girl losing her virginity; a scene of unbridled, can't-even-make-it-over-to-the-bed lust and a rape, where the girl clenches her teeth and then asks the man how much this act would have cost him in a brothel.

Fortunately, we are spared another potential rape scene with the girl's creepy brother, which always seems to loom on the horizon. Violent and opium-addicted, he is the most interesting character in the film, yet he, like the other family members, is only handed peripherally.

If you have a comment, question or suggestion, write to John Monaghan, Street Scene, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150, or call him at 953-2047, mailbox number 1886, on a touch-tone phone.



Steamy trouble: Director Jean-Jacques Annaud has a lot to fill "The Lover" with steamy love scenes, but has trouble getting expression from his lead performers.

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