



charlotte sometimes

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'Sometimes' a great notion



Eugenia Yuan and Michael Idemoto in "Charlotte Sometimes," a film by Eric Byler

By **ROGER EBERT**

I'm often asked what purpose film festivals serve. My answer this week is: The Hawaii Film Festival gave me an opportunity to see "Charlotte Sometimes," an Asian-American "art film." It's about two relationships, but doesn't fit into any conventional category involving love or romance. It's more about secrets, power and buried issues between Asian-American men and women. It is written, directed and acted with the penetrating shorthand of a short story; we experience the plot at first-hand, without tiresome dialogue in which people explain things they already know, so that the audience can be briefed.

Going into the film, I expected some kind of a conventional boy-girl story, in which the problem is that the boy and girl are not in love, and that's fixed by the happy ending. This movie is not about those moronic movie romances. It is about very particular people with needs and fears, and the way they dance around the lies that separate them.

Michael Idemoto stars as Michael, an auto mechanic. He

reads all the time; is intellectual, moody, lonely; inherited the garage from his family. He lives in his childhood home, which he has divided. His tenant is Lori (Eugenia Yuan). She has a friend named Justin (Matt Westmore), but after their loud and energetic lovemaking, she often knocks on Michael's door for companionship.

One day in a bar, Michael meets Darcy (Jacqueline Kim). She is intimidating: formidably smart, mysteriously perverse. They spend a long night of drinking and talking. There is something there between them, but when Darcy suggests sex, Michael dances away because that is too easy, and he wants to get to know her first. She says sex is a shortcut to knowing. She has only a few days--she doesn't say why--and then she has to leave. (No it isn't because she's dying. This is a smart movie.)

I began to realize this would not be the story of how they ended in each other's arms, but the story of how they got past each other's defenses--or under each other's skins. Darcy appears and disappears. She is inquisitive about the nature of his relationship with Lori: Are they really only friends? Jacqueline Kim suggests a need and pain in her character that is never forced, but always there, just out of sight, and scary.

A relationship picture that plays like an emotional thriller.

**Uncannily realistic...
fascinating and illuminating**

The writer-director, Eric Byler, who says he dislikes expository dialogue, presents Darcy and Michael in an uncannily realistic way: This relationship, with all of its trying and testing, its game-playing and sudden darts toward feeling, is more real than most movies allow. There are scenes in which we sense more is going on than anyone admits, but the movie lets us speculate without spoiling everything with dramatic revelations. We participate in this film. The actors reject layers of actorly mannerisms to come out clean and clear as plausible, quirky individuals. Byler avoids underlining

everything with big closeups and reaction shots, but traps them in space together as they try to figure out what they mean to each other. This is a relationship picture that plays like an emotional thriller.

"Charlotte Sometimes" is the best of the films I've seen so far at the Hawaii festival, which has emerged as a premiere showcase for films of the Pacific Rim. What films like this represent is a breakthrough for Asian-American filmmakers. For the first generation, it was enough that their films existed: Wow! Asians in an American movie! Now the filmmakers have lost their self-consciousness, have freed themselves from the need to fit into conventional patterns.

Films like "Charlotte Sometimes" and Justin Lin's Sundance hit "Better Luck Tomorrow," also showing here, show Asian-American characters who do not "represent their community" or project a "positive image" or do anything else except what characters in all good movies do: be themselves, in a way that is fascinating and illuminating. Copyright © Chicago Sun-Times Inc.

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