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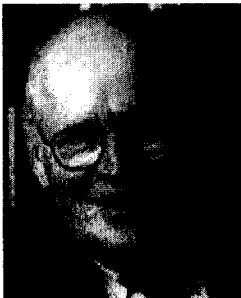
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Psychotherapy

Reel Life

Shower

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The film "Shower" carries a "made in China" label, but the man behind it is an indefatigable young American producer, Peter Loehr. Loehr speaks near-perfect Beijing Mandarin, and has managed to set up and retain control of his own film company where he makes Chinese films with an American flavor. "Shower" is Loehr's third film. Released in 2000, it has been recognized with many international awards.

The film has a Chinese director, Zhang Yang, but the screenplay structurally resembles an American television situation comedy. As in the long-running sitcom "Cheers," several regular customers gather in a communal setting where everyone knows their name; here the setting is a communal bath rather than a tavern.

Unlike the typical American sitcom, "Shower" presents a real and insoluble problem: What do you do with your mentally retarded adult brother when your father dies? The director addresses this question with sophistication and intelligence.

Artists search for the universal in the particular, and Zhang found it in the fate of Er Ming, a mentally retarded man whose world ends when his father dies.

We all rely on a subconscious radar system that tracks small differences in body language and appearance. We know, without knowing exactly why we know it, that there is something wrong about the way a person smiles, the rhythm of his speech or gait, how he stands, or the way he occupies his space. This radar system detects the "difference" in people with so-called developmental disabilities.

In responding to those signals, some feel revulsion; others feel sympathy—it is the rare human being who feels empathy. These are the living saints among us—those whose hearts go out to the different other. The film's

achievement is allowing the audience to understand, for a brief moment, what it feels like to be a saint. By the end of "Shower", all but the hardest-hearted members of the audience will empathize with Er Ming.

Although much of the credit must go to Zhang's direction and the screenplay, the three actors Zhu Xu, Pu Cun Xin, and Wu Jiang give the kind of performances that remind us that acting is indeed one of the highest artistic callings.

In this film, Xu, who plays the father, is the keeper of the communal bath for men in the rundown outskirts of modern Beijing. Master Liu's way of life—the world he has created and shares with his retarded son Er Ming—is being destroyed by the juggernaut of modernity, represented by his other son, Da Ming.

Master Liu's death will precipitate a crisis for Da Ming, who has left his humble family behind and moved to a different city. He now showers instead of bathes and is on the fast track to success in modern, "cell phone" China. His father, keeper of the old-fashioned communal bath, is an all-purpose caretaker, masseur, barber, traditional healer, and creator of community. Master Liu doctors the souls of his customers as well as their bodies—he is the spiritual embodiment of tradition.

Master Liu's dedication to water (he and Er Ming actually live in the back of the bathhouse) is given an explicitly sacred connection. In a flashback to an arid mountain landscape, the indigenous people gather to pray that there will be water in the communal well. This flashback allows Zhang to add scenic vistas to the urban palette of his cinematography. Set against the bathhouse, the flashback creates a visual parable of the scarcity and superfluity of China, with its vast arid wastelands and overflowing rivers. Master Liu, who comes from that arid region, is the mediating link between these two Chinas.

The conventional wisdom about the mentally retarded is that they adapt better in rural communities where life consists of simple rhythms and unvarying routines. In the film, Master Liu's bathhouse serves as that simpler community. Er Ming is happily and helpfully at home working beside his father. The clients all know Er Ming and accept him.

This bond between father and son is the ultimate example of successful caretaking. It is all the more impressive because of Master Liu's genuine pleasure in their playful relationship. Racing around the neighborhood every evening in matching blue running suits, they both unmistakably enjoy themselves. Both love the routines of the bath, which structure their lives and give rhythm to the film.

Unfortunately, the bathhouse and its neighborhood are about to be bulldozed in the name of progress. The older brother Da Ming is part of that progress, and when he comes home to visit, he is visibly ashamed of his origins and his retarded brother.

Nor is Master Liu happy to see this successful, but to his mind prodigal, son, who has abandoned his family. The father expresses these feelings. In America, Da Ming would have been "out of there" in no time. But guilt, shame, and filial obligation have not yet been so attenuated in this Chinese son.

Da Ming swallows his disdain, sets aside his cell phone, and even helps out in the routine duties of the bath, surprising his father and delighting Er Ming. But this is a momentary gesture of Xiao (the special Chinese word for filial love), not a commitment to the world of the communal bath. When Master Liu dies, Da Ming must decide whether Xiao obligates him to sacrifice his own fast track to success for his retarded brother.

The American progressive slogan is "normalization": Help the mentally retarded person to live as normal a life as possible. It has been one of the great success stories of 20th century Rawlsian humanism. Normalization has saved hundreds of thousands of handicapped children from the real and symbolic stigmatization of total institutionalization. Enormous public resources have been allocated to improve their quality of life.

But the truth is, many will never be self-sufficient, and normalization is both expensive and time consuming. This is most painfully evident when the caretaking parent dies and the mentally retarded adult is not capable of living independently.

Thirty-five years ago, in the admitting offices of so-called training schools across America, the same scenario shown in "Shower" would be played out. In the aftermath of the caretaking parent's death, the sibling would look to the "total" institution to relieve him of the unwanted responsibility for the mentally retarded adult.

Everyone with experience in these transactions realized what would happen: Separated from his caretaker and his familiar routines, the mentally retarded person would almost always regress. Frightened and bewildered, some would become combative and end up in restraints. Struggling and incontinent, they would be reduced to the level of animals. The basic skills learned over decades of parental caretaking could be destroyed in days.

Even under normalization, many American families face a crisis when the caretaking parent dies and the available alternative is the smaller, sheltered settings—some good, some bad—that have replaced the megainstitutions of the past.

China, like much of the world, lacks the resources that have paid for normalization in America. Devoted parents like Master Liu provide all the care, and when they die the only options are China's total institutions.

In the film, Da Ming takes his brother to such a place, where the predictable regression occurs. Baffled by the unfamiliar surroundings, Er Ming bolts and soon is like a wild animal struggling with people in white coats. He is moments from chemical or physical restraints when Da Ming reappears to rescue him.

What happens in the rest of this film lifts it out of the category of formulaic Hollywood endings. Da Ming calls his wife on the cell phone to tell her his father has died and belatedly explains that his brother is mentally retarded and that he is thinking of bringing him home. His modern Chinese wife hangs up on him.

The scenes that follow show Zhang Yang's power and sophistication as a psychologist and an artist. Dialogue disappears and the narrative moves by visual images that create a mood and tell the story at several levels.

After the call to his wife, Da Ming finds his brother in the darkened and suddenly foreboding bathhouse, deathly still, head twisted to one side and looking up like a man who has hanged himself. Then there is the familiar image of Master Liu's hands beating out the rhythms of a Chinese massage, and as the frame enlarges, we see that it is Da Ming, the prodigal son on the fast track, who is becoming his lost father, taking on his work and his relationship with Er Ming. He even dons the matching blue tracksuit to run around the neighborhood with his brother.

Every incident in the film has created a strand, and all the strands are wordlessly tied together in the end. Er Ming, desperate for the routines that structure his world, becomes the symbol of the Old China. Da Ming's return to the fold cannot save the traditions nor the bathhouse from urban renewal, and we do not know whether his Xiao is enough to make him a living saint, someone who goes beyond empathy and sacrifices his own way of life to save his brother's.

In the end, we are left to weep (I did) and wonder what can be salvaged from this clash of tradition and modernity in contemporary China. "Shower" makes one think about China's future not as a contest between a young man and a tank in Tiananmen Square but as erosion by the global economy of the family-based traditions that have sustained Chinese civilization.

Next month he reviews "Thirteen Conversations About One Thing." Share your thoughts with Dr. Stone by e-mailing him at cpnews@imng.com

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