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By KEVIN THOMAS

Chen Kaige's "The Promise" is lots of things at once: an exquisite fairy tale, a glorious martial arts fantasy, a romantic epic of exceptional emotional resonance and a consideration of the paradoxical nature of destiny, in which Chen suggests that the workings of fate are not absolution for personal responsibility. Chen's perceptive direction of his superb cast is equaled by the film's luminous cinematography, rich yet spare and stylized production and costume design, and rousing score.

At its heart is the eternal triangle, with an echo of "Cyrano de Bergerac" and Kurosawa's "Kagemusha." The delicate beauty Qingcheng (Cecilia Cheung) falls in love with the great military leader Gen. Guangming (Hiroyuki Sanada), believing he dared to kill an emperor in order to save her life. But

her savior was actually the general's slave, Kunlun (Jang Dong-Gun), his identity hidden.

Every general requires a worthy adversary, and Guangming's is the wily, cruel and effete Wuhuan (Nicholas Tse). As time goes by the characters and their fates attain a Shakespearean grandeur and accrue the complexity of the key figures of Chen's landmark "Farewell, My Concubine." The film's title refers to a promise Qingcheng broke in childhood that reverberates throughout the picture to assert that what counts in life above all else is honor.

Intentionally or otherwise, Chen honors the memory of the late, great King Hu in expressing a profound spirituality through the martial arts.

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By ARMOND WHITE

There are countless episodes in Chen Kaige's "The Promise" where I wanted to turn to my screening room colleagues and shout: "Did y'all see that!" I wanted to urge them out of their baffled astonishment and into the right, unmystified appreciation. For in "The Promise," a warrior romance set in fifth century China ("between a sea of sky and a land of snow"), Chen has made the aesthetic breakthrough no one could see coming. The elaborate choreography of Hong Kong (HK) action movies combined with the visual freedom of anime was inevitable; digital f/x already gave Zhang Yimou that synthesis in "Hero." Here, Chen uses technology to advance more soulful visual poetry.

Through "The Promise's" odd look of prehistorical Pop Art, the images seem textured as if from furious penmanship or manic brushstrokes, yet they convey the characters' passions. This bas-relief intensity throws viewers who aren't prepared to take such images seriously. Perhaps too much anime and a chop-socky surfeit has distanced them from feeling "The Promise's" primal story: A slave, Kunlun (Jang Dong-Gun), helps a warrior General (Hiroyuki Sanada) win the affection of Princess Qingcheng (Cecilia Cheung), a woman destined to lose every man she ever loves. This curse, bestowed in childhood, plays like original sin in the characters' adult lives; their unconscious struggle for affection is contrasted to the lifelong vengeance of a sorcerer-Duke (Nicholas Tse) and his own suffering slave-assassin (Liu Ye).

If this was just political allegory, Chen would be banal (an exuberant Ang Lee). Instead, Chen's abiding interest in the frissons of instinct, commitment and hope (the insides of politics as seen in "Temptress Moon" and "Together") prompt him to radicalize China's national pop narrative. The HK action flick is China's Western, but its emphasis on Zen violence (a distorted version of Hollywood's rugged individualism) has made it a trite and degraded genre. Chen gives it an artist's psychologically complex inflections, rooted in his characters' vividly dramatized motivations. The result is salvific, like Stephen Chow's peoples' comedies "Kung Fu Hustle" and "Shaolin Soccer"—

transcendent epics that redeem HK action tropes from grind-house nihilism.

Departing from strict photographic realism, "The Promise" gains the force—the beauty—of parable. Each apparition, each narrative sequence, feels like reading the Bible—a commingling of the true and the fantastic. Every scene burgeons with hope: A tribute to Kunlun and the Princess' redoubtable emotions and recognizable drives. It is the hope implicit in Chen's modernist search for Myth. When a phalanx of downtrodden slaves are forced to crawl before a stampede of bison, the action is startling. Kunlun learns to stand while running—it's a psychological metaphor but it's also Stephen-Chow-amazing. That is, cartoon-like without being silly; it's enflamed.

"The Promise" has imagery such as John Boorman took from legend for "Excalibur," or as Matthew Barney sought in the Asian-accented "Drawing Restraint 9"—atavistic, precognitive, of ancient ritual still connected to its moment of inspiration. (The Duke traps the Princess in a vaulting bird cage.) But because Chen has a Bertoluccian gift for color and rhythm, the images also exude eroticism as when the Princess falls upon circled-patterns of crimson shields that produce the effect of blossoming flowers. By comparison, Peter Jackson's Dinosaur-run pastiche of "Jurassic Park" in "King Kong" was just a ridiculous loop of CGI templates.

With "The Promise," Chen Kaige joins cinema's archetypal visionaries from Murnau to Kurosawa, Bertolucci to Boorman. He's made an action movie rich with adult meaning and paradox—as when the Princess pauses and kisses the General, a kiss that gives orgasmic rest. Chen commits to genre refinement; he shows exactly what you need to see with no excess—but with sudden shifts where dreamlike events take on a realism of supernal clarity. "The Promise" is a corrective to the HK/Peter Jackson trend where action and speed are abused. Even more, it's Chen's pledge to preserve what makes movies great by visually revving-up our subconscious. As Kunlun, the liberated slave, is told: "To achieve real speed you must discover your heart's desire."

