

‘A Simple Life’ Celebrates the Transcendent Beauty of Human Selflessness

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The inherent drama of reality is trickier to capture on camera than one might suspect. Cinéma verité failed as soon as filmmakers utilized manipulative techniques to contrive on-camera drama. The staged shouting matches, comedic barbs and tearful breakdowns prevalent on Reality TV are as phony (or, dare I say, phonier) than the human behavior witnessed in scripted productions.

So many films that purport themselves to be realistic depictions of life rely on clichéd misunderstandings and third act revelations to fuel the dramatic conflict. This is an easy alternative to exploring human relationships unbound by the limitations of a formula. As one of the essential figures of the Hong Kong New Wave, Ann Hui avoids such constructs like the plague. There’s more reality-per-frame in her new film, “A Simple Life,” than there is in TLC’s entire programming schedule.

Here is a film about two good people who have become devoted to helping one another in their hour of need. They aren’t lovers but lifelong friends. One is an elderly maid, Ah Tao (played by veteran character actress Deanie Ip), and the other is her beloved client, Roger Leung (Andy Lau). The prologue informs us that Ah Tao has served four generations of Leungs for the last sixty years, and Roger is the only family member still remaining in Hong Kong (his mother and other siblings have moved to America). Ah Tao has been a part of his life for so long that it’s only when she suffers a sudden stroke that he realizes just how much she means to him. When Ah Tao reveals her decision to retire and move into a nursing home, Roger makes no attempt to have her reconsider. He realizes that the tables have flipped, causing him to be the caregiver, a role he is only too happy to fill. It’s touching to see how both friends passionately argue for each other’s interests, whether it’s Roger interrogating a nurse about excessive medical costs or Ah Tao interviewing prospective maids about their kitchen skills. There’s poignance in Roger’s professional career in the film industry, since it was Ah Tao who secretly smuggled film magazines for him against his parents’ wishes when he was still a child. Now Roger is repaying the favor.



Deanie Ip and Andy Lau star in China Lion's A SIMPLE LIFE.

Photo credit: China Lion Entertainment

The only thing that could be categorized as “simple” in this picture is Roger’s effortless decision to embrace his new function in Ah Tao’s life. There’s no need for formulaic conflicts in a film where characters must face the frustration of a failing body, the anxiety of adjusting to the challenges and eccentricities of a nursing home, and the fear that death will vanquish the opportunity to share in the joyous milestones of loved ones. One of the saddest sequences in the picture juxtaposes the visceral thunder of a live fireworks display with the muffled blur of its televised footage viewed by Ah Tao and a lonely supervisor (Qin Hailu). Yu Lik Wai’s elegant cinematography makes intriguing use of reflections in the nursing home walls and windows, suggesting that the spirit world coexists within the realm inhabited by mortals. Though the nursing home initially seems like a dreary place, with ailing souls cloistered in their private cells and doted upon by weary nurses, the film doesn’t shroud the establishment in bleakness. One resident, referred to as “Uncle Kin” (Chin Pei), prides himself as the home’s life force, takes an instant liking to Ah Tao and urges her to find a hobby that will keep her occupied. That hobby does not, alas, involve dating Uncle Kin, and Ah Tao’s reluctance to forge personal relationships mirrors that of Roger. In many ways, they are the perfect match for one another.

Whereas most films centering on maids are of the dark or cautionary variety (“The Maid” and “The Help” immediately spring to mind), Hui’s film celebrates the nobility of a life selflessly lived at the service of others. In the production notes, Hui mentions that she wanted the film to spark a conversation about how societies treat the elderly, an issue that certainly transcends cultural boundaries. Throughout her celebrated career, Hui has sported a consistent interest in tackling issues ranging from communism (“Boat People”) and activism (“Ordinary Heroes”) to exile (“The Song of Exile”) and Alzheimer’s (“Summer Snow”). It’s clear that her championing of social awareness hasn’t lost any of its vitality, and “A Simple Life” deserves to be ranked alongside her most provocative and deftly affecting works to date.



Deanie Ip and Andy Lau star in China Lion’s A SIMPLE LIFE.

Photo credit: China Lion Entertainment

In a film this quiet and subtly nuanced, it’s easy to take the performances for granted, but what Andy Lau and Deanie Ip achieve in this film is tantamount to a master class in screen acting. They convey their shared history through countless moments of gentle warmth and disarming humor, such as when Ah Tao congratulates Roger on a successful film premiere, before admitting that she nodded off during the feature. At two hours, Hui’s film may be deliberately paced, but it quickly absorbs the viewer within the rhythms of its character’s lives to the point where you’re barely aware of the time passing. It’s a shame that this film’s theatrical run in America is limited to a handful of venues, but AMC should be applauded for reserving one of its screens for this wonderful character vignette. If aggressively marketed superhero franchises give you nothing but headaches, this one’s for you.

‘A Simple Life’ stars Andy Lau, Deanie Ip, Wang Fuli, Qin Hailu, Eman Lam, Anthony Wong, Hui Bik Kee and Chin Pei. It was written by Susan Chan and Roger Lee and directed by Ann Hui. It was released May 4th at the AMC River East 21 in Chicago. It is not rated.



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