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Home » Movie Reviews » Modern Times » TIFF13: A Grand Canal (2013)

## MODERN TIMES



### TIFF13: A Grand Canal (2013)

Posted by Sean Fitzpatrick | September 6, 2013 | 0 Comment | 2177 views

 51
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In Wim Wenders' lyrical 1980 film, *Lightning over Water*, the German director engages in an extended grieving process over the loss of his friend, Hollywood auteur Nicholas Ray. As the film nimbly jumps between its documentary and fictional elements, it gradually reveals itself as a stunning meditation on mortality and art that blurs the lines between reality and unreality to show the ways in which a story, whether true or untrue, can help us with understanding the death of a loved one. After watching and being haunted by Johnny Ma's beautiful new short film, *A Grand Canal*, which is screening during the Canadian Short Cuts segment of this year's Toronto International Film Festival, I couldn't help but remember my first experience watching *Lightning over Water*.

Part Ye Lou, part Wenders, *A Grand Canal* is a cinematic poem that's both heartbreaking and unforgettable. The film details the tragic last day of a largely absentee father (Mei Song Shun) who works as a sea captain on China's eponymous artificial river. Told from the point of view of the sea captain's son, and narrated in voice-over by Ma himself, the narrative has an elliptical, biographical structure and mournful tone that's enhanced by the director's use of grainy film stock.

The film's patchwork plot outlines the sea captain's misfortune as he stops the shipment of a corrupt waterfront gangster known as Boss Wang in an attempt to gain leverage when requesting an overdue payment, confronts Wang face-to-face, and subsequently disappears. Although the plotline is simple on paper, Ma's detailed use of setting is ingenious, having the confrontation between the father and Boss Wang take place during a 1000-person wedding and giving the sea captain's boat an almost joyful quality by surrounding his nautical scenes with beautiful pop music. Ma uses the pop songs of Chinese singer Liu Huan to characterize the father as a sensitive soul, a kind man who, despite his onshore responsibilities, belongs to his boat. These subtleties in plot and character development allow Ma to pull off the self-reflexive coup of the film's final three minutes.

Like *Lightning over Water*, *A Grand Canal* plays like an avant-garde elegy, an experimental visual

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poem lamenting something lost but not forgotten. The wedding, boats, gangsters, and pop songs of the film's preceding sixteen minutes come together in a flourish of filmmaking that recalls the groundbreaking Chinese films of the 1990s as much as European art cinema. It's a bold move, and one that Ma earns in the film's remarkably short duration. Both inventive and haunting, *A Grand Canal* is a short film that will stay with you long after the credits roll.

### Screening Times for A Grand Canal

Sunday September 8 TIFF Bell Lightbox 3 2:30 PM

Monday September 9 TIFF Bell Lightbox 3 12:00 PM

### A Gallery of Images from A Grand Canal



### Watch the Trailer for A Grand Canal



GRAND CANAL JOHNNY MA TIFF13

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### About Sean Fitzpatrick



Freelance film critic and avid fan of music, books, and movies. Learned the mercantile trade from my father and uncle, Niccolo and Maffeo, and met Kublai Khan.

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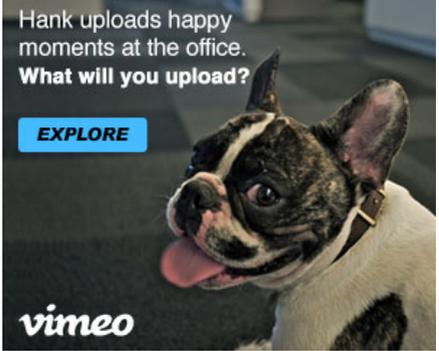
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