

Take Out delivers a harsh slice of life

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A few days ago, I was almost run over by a Chinese delivery man. It wasn't my first close call: Over the years, I've yanked my daughter's stroller out of the way of a cyclist crossing against the light, had my heel bruised by the pedal of a delivery bike going the wrong way down a one-way street, and watched as a beefy guy in a suit was bowled over by someone with an apparent disregard for brakes.

But even as I quietly cursed the guy who whipped by me last week, I spared a moment to think about what might have brought him to our near collision.

The evening before, I'd watched *Take Out*, a quietly remarkable slice of vérité drama which opened last Friday at the Quad Cinemas in the Village. Shot for about \$3,000 - or as much as some people will drop on an after-work blowout at China Grill - the film is a close-up view of one day in the life of a recently arrived Chinese immigrant.

Awoken early by a pair of hammer-wielding heavies working for a loan shark, Ming Ding (Charles Jang) is attacked for missing a payment and warned that he has until the end of the day to scare up \$800 or face a doubling of the crushing loan he took out to pay off smugglers. (Rather than putting aside money for the debt, he sent home some cash to support his wife and the toddler son he has never met.) Even after canvassing friends and family, Ming still has to earn \$150 in one shift as a delivery man at a cheap MSG purveyor on the Upper West Side, an almost impossible task.

A reporter for The New York Times suggested *Take Out* was like *24* with General Tso's Chicken, but while the film's plot is driven by a looming deadline, it unfolds with little sense of heart-pounding urgency. Jack Bauer would shrivel and die in the face of the monotony that characterizes Ming's days: the endless chaining and unchaining of his beat-up bike; the trudging through the concrete corridors of housing projects and the marble foyers of co-ops; the agonizing accumulation of \$1 bills; the intermittent racism. (One benefit of Ming's lack of English: He doesn't understand the insults hurled his way.)

Take Out was shot with a tiny digital camera in a hole-in-the-wall fried-rice palace on Amsterdam Avenue, using a largely inexperienced cast who slipped in behind the woks whenever there was a brief lag in the restaurant's orders. Pointing to such influences as Mike Leigh and the Dardenne brothers, the filmmakers - Sean Baker, who created the cult hit *Greg the Bunny*, and Shih-Ching Tsou - have captured the dull atmospheric frenzy of a fast-food stall. The smell of ginger and garlic and shrimp and grease practically punches through the screen.

After watching the film, I found it disorienting to read the press notes: The cast was so loose and casual, I had trouble accepting they had been working from a script rather than just improvising. (At some post-screening Q&As, audience members have asked the filmmakers about the current welfare of Ming Ding, seemingly unaware that he is fictional.)

Toward the end of the film, Ming is sent out for one last delivery. As he made his way through another dimly lit hallway, I was more on edge than when I watched Liv Tyler scream her way through *The Strangers*.

As if Snakeheads aren't enough of a looming threat - the current cost of smuggling one person into the United States, about \$70,000, takes an average of five years to pay off, and if women fall behind in the payments they are often pressed into prostitution - delivery men are routinely mugged, especially at the end of a shift, when they are often carrying large amounts of cash. At least three have been killed in New York since 2000.

As my wife and I watched *Take Out*, she turned to me and asked quietly, "How many delivery men in the neighbourhood would you say are paying off debts?" I didn't have an answer.

Take Out, which does not yet have a Canadian distributor, is part of an apparently growing genre of films about illegal immigrants trying to survive between the cracks, a niche that includes Ramin Bahrani's lovingly observed 2005 indie *Man Push Cart*, about a former Pakistani rock star operating a coffee-and-doughnuts cart in midtown Manhattan. More recently, we've had glimpses of the Mexican illegal immigrant experience in *Fast Food Nation* and *Under the Same Moon*. Later this month, Sean Baker will travel to the Los Angeles Film Festival with his newest work, *Prince of Broadway*, about an illegal immigrant from Ghana selling counterfeit goods in the wholesale district of Manhattan.

At the conclusion of the genre's most commercially successful film, Stephen Frears's 2002 thriller *Dirty Pretty Things*, a white Londoner casts an astonished gaze at a trio of immigrants and asks, "Why haven't I seen you people before?" Chiwetel Ejiofor, playing a Nigerian-born cabbie, answers with a quiet sense of pride, "Because we're the people you don't see. We drive your cabs and clean your rooms and suck your...." Ahem. I can't print that last word. But you get the idea.

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