

Bhutan's 'Travelers' explores the bitterness of the better life

MORTON MARCUS - Sentinel correspondent
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WHAT: 'Travelers and Magicians.'

RATED: Not rated: In Dzongka with English subtitles.

WHERE: The Nickelodeon, 426-7500.

LENGTH: 1 hour, 48 minutes.

VERDICT: A.

By MORTON MARCUS Sentinel correspondent

There are several astonishing things about Bhutanese director Khyentse Norbu's delightful second film, "Travelers & Magicians."

First, it is about one of the major dilemmas of our time; namely, the attraction of the inhabitants of Third World tradition-bound societies to the glitz and glamour of Western culture. Second, it is the first fiction film shot in the kingdom of Bhutan, Tibet's isolated southern neighbor. And third, its cast is composed entirely of non-actors who are so comfortable and natural in front of the camera they look as if they have been performing professionally for decades.

Norbu, whose first film, "The Cup," captivated Santa Cruz audiences in 1999 at the Nickelodeon and again this past October at the Pacific Rim Film Festival, both wrote and directed this story of Dondup, a dissatisfied young government official in a remote Bhutanese village.

Dondup dreams of money, punk rock and beautiful women—all the allures of Western culture. When a long awaited letter from a friend arrives inviting him to the United States, Dondup leaves the village immediately. Armed with a boom box, Nike sneakers and his favorite rock tapes, he impatiently hitchhikes along a mountain road on his way to Thimphu, Bhutan's capital city and his embarkation point to America.

Along the way he is joined by an apple seller, a Buddhist monk, and an old man and his teenage daughter. The wily monk immediately recognizes the source of Dondup's restlessness and irritability and begins to tell the group the story of a young man like Dondup who also wanted a different, more exciting life. This tale becomes a film within the film, a timeless parable which is interrupted again and again by incidents and conversations in the main film where the travelers continue their journey.

Norbu handles the film's structure with a light touch. Not only do the hitchhikers' interactions reveal character, but the camera continually gazes past them to show the beautiful Bhutanese mountain landscape Dondup ignores.

Not that Dondup is a "bad" man. He is polite and observes the native customs, and is never cruel. He just wants to be part of the exciting, hip life that he describes to the monk when they first meet as his "dream world," not taking into account the phrase's negative implications to Buddhists, and to which the monk immediately replies, "The Buddha said hope (read here the word's alternate meanings of 'dreams' and 'desires') leads to pain."

The wise but mischievous monk continually teases Dondup about his "dream world," and although Dondup is annoyed by the constant chiding, he is never rude to the man. In fact, there are no villains in the film, which makes the characters' foibles more easily recognizable and acceptable to the audience.

Seemingly episodic, even random at first, Norbu's script is cut down to essentials and pursues its theme visually and aurally as well as verbally. Typical is the tongue-in-cheek dÃ©cor of Dondup's room in the village, its walls decorated with pin-ups of Western models and an old World War II U.S. recruitment poster that pointedly informs the viewer, "Uncle Sam Wants You!"

And when Dondup floods the serene mountain landscape with a caterwauling tape in his boom box, it's wryly apt that the screaming singer's lyrics are "Got to get out of here!" And what about those spotlessly clean, out-of-place Nikes the camera keeps cutting to in extreme close-ups, or Dondup's T-shirt emblazoned with the words "I Love New York"?

The otherworldly atmosphere of the film-within-the-film is another small astonishment, since Norbu attains it without the use of expensive computer-generated special effects. Its eeriness is achieved by tinting the film stock sepia and purple, speeding up the camera, and blurring the backgrounds with different size lenses.

For those of you who were enthralled by the simple wisdom and visual splendor of the recent Chinese

import "The Postmen in The Mountains," "Travelers & Magicians" is a must-see.

Morton Marcus — the co-host of the TV film review show "Cinema Scene," which airs Thursdays and Sundays on Channel 27 at 8:30 p.m. — leads free film discussions at the Nickelodeon the first and third Saturdays of the month.

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