

TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

THURSDAY, APRIL 20, 2023

7 P.M. • HUMANITIES

QUADRANGLE

ALICE CINEMA

WHAT TIME IS IT THERE?

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 P.H.D.



"I feel I belong neither to Taiwan nor to Malaysia. In a sense, I can go anywhere I want and fit in, but I never feel that sense of belonging."

—Tsai Ming-liang



Born in Malaysia in 1957, Tsai Ming-liang moved to Taiwan to study in the Drama and Cinema Department at the Chinese Cultural University of Taiwan. In a 2002 interview around the American release of *WHAT TIME IS IT THERE?*, Tsai explained his evolution to Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times*: "At the time I did not imagine myself becoming a filmmaker. I just liked movies.

So, when I went to college, I selected what was closest to film, Western theater. After I got out of college, I started writing for a living, writing for TV. I wrote a lot of kids' programs, a lot of weird things. And I also worked in theater for a long time." It was at university where Tsai first became exposed to European cinema, including Italian neo-realism and the French New Wave, which, in particular, would come to play a role in *WHAT TIME IS IT THERE?*

Tsai Ming-liang is one of the most acclaimed filmmakers of the Taiwanese "Second New Wave," and his films have received awards around the world, including a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival for his second feature film, *VIVE L'AMOUR* (1994), Berlin's Silver Bear awards for *THE RIVER* (1997) and *THE WAYWARD CLOUD* (2005), and a Grand Special Jury Prize at Venice for *STRAY DOGS* (2013).

WHAT TIME IS IT THERE?, Tsai's fifth feature, was his first to receive regular release in the United States. The film tells parallel stories centering on three characters: first, a young man, Hsiao-kang, who sells watches on a skywalk near a bustling Taipei train station, played by Tsai's longtime leading man Lee Kang-sheng. Hsiao-kang's mother, played by Lu Yi-Cheng, has recently lost her husband and searches for his presence after he's passed away. Finally, a young woman, Shiang-chyi, buys a watch from the Hsiao-kang before departing for a trip to Paris. After selling her the watch—in fact, his own dual-time watch—Hsiao-kang becomes obsessed with the woman now in Paris, and he attempts to change every clock he sees in Taipei to Paris time. At one point, in one of many parallels in the film, Shiang-chyi sits on a bench in Paris and finds herself in conversation with the legendary French actor Jean-Pierre Léaud, while Hsiao-kang, in Taipei, watches the young Léaud, as Antoine Doinel, in François Truffaut's *THE 400 BLOWS* (1959).

Tsai's films are marked by long, static shots that highlight nearly imperceptible changes within the frame, expressions of a feeling of melancholy and emptiness. *WHAT TIME IS IT THERE?* continues these trademark long takes and stationary camera work, this time under the direction of French cinematographer Benoit Delhomme, whose work was seen earlier this *Treasures* season in *THE SCENT OF GREEN PAPAYA*. But despite the melancholy mood, as Kevin Thomas describes it, *WHAT TIME IS IT THERE?* "is actually his lightest work, its open ending offering a ray of hope. The dark absurdist humor that runs through Tsai's films is stronger here than in any of his previous pictures."

While Hsiao-kang's affinity for *THE 400 BLOWS* and Jean-Pierre Léaud's appearance bring the work of François Truffaut into the film, critic Jonathan Rosenbaum points to two other French filmmakers as influences on Tsai: Jacques Tati and Jacques Rivette. Rosenbaum points to Rivette for the way both filmmakers' works "are constructed as elaborate two-part inventions, oscillating back and forth." Less obviously, perhaps, Rosenbaum proposes that Tsai and Tati share a "playful way of coping with sensory overload...a new form of transaction in charting the complexity of the modern world."

DIRECTED BY **TSAI MING-LIANG**

WRITTEN BY **TSAI MING-LIANG** AND **YANG PI-YING**

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **BENOIT DELHOMME**

PRODUCED BY **HOMEGREEN FILMS** (2001), 116 MINS.

STARRING **LEE KANG-SHENG, CHEN SHIANG-CHYI, LU YI-CHING, MIAO TIEN, AND JEAN-PIERRE LÉAUD**

DID YOU KNOW: LEE KANG-SHENG AND CHEN SHIANG-CHYI REPRISER THEIR CHARACTERS FROM *WHAT TIME IS IT THERE?* IN TWO OF TSAI'S SUBSEQUENT FILMS. IN THE 2002 SHORT *THE SKYWALK IS GONE*, SHIANG-CHYI RETURNS FROM PARIS TO FIND THAT THE SKYWALK WHERE SHE BOUGHT HER WATCH FROM HSIAO-KANG HAS BEEN DEMOLISHED, AND IN *THE WAYWARD CLOUD* (2005), THE TWO FORM A RELATIONSHIP DURING A WATER SHORTAGE.

NEXT UP: FILMMAKER DONNA DEITCH'S DEBUT FEATURE FILM PORTRAYS THE ROMANCE BETWEEN A COLUMBIA PROFESSOR AWAITING HER DIVORCE AND A FREE-SPIRITED YOUNGER WOMAN. SET IN RENO, NEVADA, IN THE 1950S, *DESERT HEARTS* IS CONSIDERED THE FIRST FEATURE FILM CENTERED ON A LESBIAN LOVE STORY DIRECTED BY A WOMAN. IT SCREENS **THURSDAY, MAY 4 AT 7 P.M.**