

THE WEDDING BANQUET

[1993]

by

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The Wedding Banquet. Wai Tung (Winston Chao) has been in America ten years as a successful entrepreneur. Leaving Taiwan has allowed him to express his homosexuality openly and he is in a happy, long-term relation with Simon (Mitchell Lichtenstein). However, his parents (Sihung Lung and Ah-Leh Gua) hound him from Taiwan to get married. He arranges a marriage of convenience with Wei Wei (May Chin), one of his tenants, herself in need of a Green Card to stay in America. His parents come to visit and, of course, chaos follows. He finally confesses his homosexuality to his parents, Wei Wei becomes pregnant, but surprisingly everything (well, most everything) is successfully resolved.

The fish-out-of-water in *The Wedding Banquet* is Simon, Wai Tung's lover. He has learned a smattering of Mandarin (enough to get him into hilarious trouble); he has learned to cook Chinese food better than Wei Wei, the intended bride; and he treats his lover's parents as if they were his own, with love and respect. I respond far more graciously to this positive image of cross-cultural connections than to the negative one (the hopeless clod) in *The Joy Luck Club* [1993]. But this is only one example of *The Wedding Banquet's* uniqueness.

Recent comedy, especially TV comedy, has become one of vituperation. Name-calling and insult are the typical TV stand-up comedians' means of forging a link with the audience, as if keying into the basest and lowest feelings is a means of instant recognition and success. When ethnicity is involved, the horror is magnified beyond belief: Japanese car jokes, Ethiopian starvation jokes, Korean grocer jokes.

The only topic more avidly latched onto by these comedians is gender issues. The stream of sexual bile spewed by both male and female comedians on various cable channels against straight men and straight women looks like a Sunday school lecture compared to what gays and lesbians must endure from these "entertainers." Gender bashing has replaced the pun as our lowest form of humor.

Into this embarrassing TV-based comedic morass comes *The Wedding Banquet* (actually a not-so-distant cousin of the Italian film, *La Cage aux Folles* [1978] which treats a similar

confrontation between the gay and the straight centered around a wedding). It treats gender issues, both homosexual and straight, proudly and with a candor that has been sorely needed for at least a generation. This is one of the few films that comes to mind in which a homosexual relationship has been portrayed as functional, stable, and healthy.

It is not only the gays who are treated with respect, but also the straights, especially the parents. Each learns of the son's homosexuality and reacts with the expected shock and self-recrimination. Yet both parents, each in their individual way, overcome the obstacles that might impede their love for their son.

This is a unique film in that everyone – *everyone* – experiences healing and growth. In *The Wedding Banquet*, when we laugh at the people on screen, we are discovering new aspects of ourselves and are laughing as much at the comedy we observe as we are laughing with the joy of self-discovery. Let me give you one example: the father, Mr. Gao.

The subtlety with which *The Wedding Banquet* treats its characters and the respect it has for its audience contrasts well to *The Joy Luck Club*'s heavy-handedness. During the course of the film, Mr. Gao has had to reevaluate all his traditional Chinese cultural attitudes regarding his son, not the least of which is his recognition of his son's homosexuality. Gao's announcement of his discovery of his son's homosexuality is stunning. While out jogging with Simon, he announces in perfect English – everyone, including the audience, assumed up to this point that he spoke only the usual (for citizens of Taiwan) Mandarin, Taiwanese, and probably Hakkanese – “I saw, I heard, I learned.” Aside from violently realigning our assumptions about the man's intellect, we are left with quite a mystery: what did he see and hear. Was it the argument between Simon and Wai-Tung? Was it the interrupted lovemaking on the stairs? Or was it something more subtle? Did he ask himself why would the landlord, Simon, care so much about his tenant as to learn a bit of his language? Why did Simon treat Mr. and Mrs. Gao with such love and caring? It is from these emotional and positive hints that he deduced the situation or from the physical hints? We never really know; we can only surmise and speculate. However, while this may be frustrating, it also points out the complexity of the characters in the film. Each works at this level.

Another example regarding Mr. Gao. At the airport, returning to Taiwan, he is approached by an attendant with a metal detector. Instead of simply spreading his arms just enough for the electronic search, Gao raises his arms high over his head and the film ends with that image in a freeze frame. This is a very odd gesture. But when we realize that father Gao's background is a military one, it begins to make sense. All during his adventure in America, he has resisted giving up the old ways – his devotion to exercise, his daily practice of brush calligraphy, and so on – as much as he has resisted recognizing the new. Now, when faced with return to the older ways which he thought he would embrace for a lifetime, in a sudden revelation, he raises his arms in a soldier's gesture of surrender. And this is what the film has been about, loving surrender. Throughout *The Wedding Banquet*, this type of poignant subtlety abounds, there for us to discover as we might the individual ingredient of one of the complex dishes served at the banquet.

At the level of the personal, *The Joy Luck Club* plumbs deeper than any ethnicity; at root it represents the fantasy of every misunderstood child – reconciliation. We also experience the strong emotions of that struggle toward reconciliation. However, we must realize that the

emotionality of the film distracts us from the repetitive plot. Were this all, the film would simply be another tear-jerker with a different complexion. Fortunately, the film also has social ramifications, as does *The Wedding Banquet*. When we walk out of the dark of *The Joy Luck Club* or *The Wedding Banquet* into the light of day, we also walk into the realization that Asians are little different from other people, that homosexuals are little different from other people.

In this aspect *The Joy Luck Club* reminds me of a story I recently heard. Four women are sitting around a table. The first one whines sorrowfully. The second moans as if in pain. The third wails as if tortured. The fourth says, "I thought we weren't going to talk about our children." These are mothers. They could be Italian, Jewish, Chinese, Polish, Mexican, . . . anything. They could be White, Yellow, Black, or Green. And that is one of the better points of *Joy Luck Club* and the core of *The Wedding Banquet*: the universality of experience.

The Wedding Banquet. Directed and produced by Ang Lee. Screenplay by Ang Lee, Neil Peng and James Schamus. Production Design by Steve Rosenzweig. Distributed by Samuel Goldwyn Co., 1993.