



NEVER THE TWO SHALL MEET

A Woman on the Beach

> By Sean Kim



HONG Sang-soo, director of such films as *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* and *Turning Gate*, is something of a poor-man's Truffaut. To watch his movies is to be a distant observer — it's as if you're watching a TV documentary on the Discovery Channel. While Hong does it with a touch more art than your typical *Animal Planet* re-run, we quickly realize that the motivations of the men and women in his films aren't much different from those of any other creature that eats, sleeps and copulates.

Joong-rae (Kim Seung-woo) is a film director who convinces his friend Moon-suk (Ko Hyeon-jeong) to spend a few days at a beach resort to help him finish his screenplay. Moon-suk agrees, but on the condition he can bring his "friend" Sun-hee (Song Seon-mi). The three then take the long drive out to the coast and so begins the pissing war between the men as they spend a long night at the resort vying for Sun-hee's attention.

The movie unfolds like a soap drama as Sun-hee flirts with Joong-rae. Joong-rae eventually pulls her into bed as he confesses his love, only to spurn her the very next day. Regretful of what he'd done, Joong-rae then attempts to relive that lost night of romance a few days later by finding a Sun-hee look-alike, played by Choi Ban-ya. They too end up in bed. Things get even more complicated when Sun-hee returns and Joong-rae casts aside the other woman. The catfight ensues as everyone gets drunk and the flood gates open.

There is no lack of male anti-heroes in any Hong Sang-soo film, and both Joong-rae and Moon-suk fit

the bill of your typical macho-yet-insecure Korean men. But even the women aren't without their faults as they play catty games against each other over a guy who isn't worth the trouble. This is something of a turn for Hong, where in past films, his women were often wells of understanding and purveyors of some secret life mystery.

But for all the bluster and bravado, *A Woman on the Beach* feels like an unfinished experiment. It's never clear what all this is supposed to say about men, women and the relationships between them. At best, Hong shows us people simply going through the motions. They collide in the way of a car crash then serenely walk away like it was nothing, neither changed for the better or worse.

These same themes were explored to better effect in Hong's previous film, *Woman is the Future of Man*. The difference with *A Woman on the Beach* is it focuses primarily on Joong-rae and his fascination/obsession with Sun-hee. But as an observer of human foibles, Hong Sang-soo is limited in scope. What's lacking is an understandable psychology behind why men and women act the way they do. Instead, Hong simply sets the scene, writes in his stock characters, and waits to see what happens.

The final scene of *A Woman on the Beach* shows Sun-hee driving off along the shore, and her car getting stuck in a sand pit. Two men come along and help push her out. She thanks them profusely, then off she goes again down the beach. This is where the movie ends. It's mysteriously open-ended and symbolic, but what we're to make of it is unclear. ☐



AN EXPERIMENT IN LUST AND DRAMA — NOW ALL IT NEEDS IS HEART.

Screen legend Anna May Wong was the first Asian American to become an international cinematic star, taking on acting roles in the U.S. and Europe.

