

MOVIES

Touch: Rotterdam Review

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THE BOTTOM LINE

Unusual, thought-provoking quasi-documentary finds a fresh angle on one of the world's most oft-filmed metropolises. [🐦](#)

Multi-hyphenate Shelly Silver's experimental portrait of Manhattan's Chinatown includes unlikely cameos from a couple of comedy superstars.

True completists of **Woody Allen** and/or **Larry David** will need to seek out **Shelly Silver**'s intriguingly offbeat Manhattan essay-film *Touch*, whose latter stages include brief but amusingly 'unofficial' cameos from both comedy superstars captured while location-filming for their 2009 flop *Whatever Works*.

But the left-field incursion of these showbiz eminences is far from being the only notable feature of the latest hybrid creation from avant-garde veteran Silver, in which she ambitiously explores New York's present-day Chinatown through the fictionalized, autobiographical prism of a returning emigre's ruminations.

Just the right length at a brisk 67 minutes, this collage of present-day footage and carefully selected archive stills is narrated almost entirely in Mandarin Chinese. But it nevertheless occupies the more accessible end of the experimental-film spectrum and can thus anticipate a fair share of festival bookings in the wake of its Rotterdam world premiere, while the duration will boost its prospects as a high-end small-screen item.

Silver, who has moved between installation, video, photography and film for nearly three decades, performs multiple duties here, including writing, directing and cinematography, and co-edits with **Cassandra Guan**. She packs many layers and subjects into her small package as she returns to terrain visited during her 2009 short *5 lessons and 9 questions about Chinatown*.

Issues of cultural and personal identity cross-pollinate with discursive enquiries into the meaning of urban space and social interaction. Using combinations of image, spoken word and caption-text, she illustrates how -- to borrow a phrase from **Sarah Polley's** not-dissimilar current picture -- the "stories we tell" about ourselves, our families and our communities build over time into complex and enigmatic structures.

Her vessel for this philosophical journey through internal and external space is an unnamed, unseen narrator -- voiced by **Lu Yu** -- who, after several decades away (presumably in China), has returned to his native neighborhood to provide hospice care for his elderly mother. We gradually glean a handful of details: the speaker is a solitary, gay librarian whose job involves "cataloging other people's lives while secretly inventing my own."

A distant cousin of **Paul Scofield's** similarly mysterious narrator from **Patrick Keiller's** seminal *Robinson* trilogy of quasi-documentaries, our "guide" here views the world through the lens of his digital camera, providing casual glimpses of everyday street-life in Chinatown from a privileged insider/outsider's perspective. The results reveal some surprisingly unfamiliar vistas of Manhattan, mundane yet engrossing streetscapes with only the occasional glimpse of the Chrysler or Empire State Building on the horizon to remind us where we are. "What I own of this place," he informs us, "I own through the images I take."

The third-act arrival of Allen, David and their crew provides a jolting disruption to Chinatown's residents but energizes Silver's project, so amusingly extreme is the contrast between *Whatever Works'* elaborate cranes, lights and rigs and *Touch's* ultra low-budget, ultra-independent approach. "He is my extra," notes the narrator as we spy on Allen scratching his itchy palms. "This is my location." Allen had an even closer brush with the avant-garde when taking a rare acting-only gig in **Jean-Luc Godard's** 1987 *King Lear*, an edgy enterprise which seems almost Hollywood-like in comparison with Silver's poignant little palimpsest of erudite longing.

Venue: Rotterdam Film Festival (Spectrum), January 24, 2013.

Production company: House Productions

Director / Screenwriter / Producer / Director of photography: Shelly Silver

Editors: Cassandra Guan, Shelly Silver

Sales agent: House Productions, New York

No MPAA rating, 67 minutes

***THE**
Hollywood*

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