

Ilo Ilo, 2014

Major Credits

Director: Anthony Chen

Screenplay: Anthony Chen

Cinematography: Benoit Soler

Cast: Yann Yann Yeo (Hwee Leng), Tian Wen Chen (Teck), Angeli Bayani (Terry), Jia Ler Koa (Jiale)

Production Background

Anthony Chen's first feature, shot in Singapore when he was 29, is rooted in the director's memory of being raised by a Filipina nanny, as were many of his friends during the 1980s when the country was undergoing rapid economic development and many parents were both working. The title refers to a Philippine province; the original Chinese title translates as "Mom and Dad Are Not at Home." Although the time period is not emphasized (diminishing the specific historical and political context), the narrative is set in 1997, a year of severe economic crisis in Malaysia that resonated in Western Europe and the USA during the film's release.

Ilo Ilo received an enthusiastic reception at many international film festivals, winning a Camera d'Or for Best First Feature at Cannes and becoming the most honored movie in the history of Singaporean cinema.

Cinematic Qualities

1. Casting: Chen devoted much attention to casting, by his own estimate looking at about 8000 kids before selecting Jia Ler Koa, who had never acted before. After casting Yann Yann Yeo, the actress informed Chen that she had become pregnant and had to persuade him to continue with her in the role. Her advancing pregnancy provides a convenient marker for the passage of time and also serves to soften her character.
2. Realism: Chen uses hand-held cameras and crowded compositions to create a sense of the nervous energy and congested conditions in the urban environment. Shot on location in Singapore, the film occasionally employs long shots of the cityscape to balance the personal story within a wider framework.

Questions for Discussion

1. The four main characters initially appear as stereotypes: "tiger" Asian mother; henpecked, ineffectual dad; bratty child; saintly maid and nanny. Chen gradually reveals them all to be more complex. Even Terry is no Mary Poppins! "Everyone has their reasons," the great filmmaker Jean Renoir once said. What deeper motivations can be discovered for the behavior of each of these characters?
2. The narrative consistently avoids melodrama. For example, Teck's big confession is something his wife already knows, and Terry's dismissal is signified merely by the return of her passport. An unknown man jumps from the roof of the apartment building, but we never learn who or why. This absence of key plot points has led the reviewer from *The Hollywood Reporter* to describe the film as "a low key exercise in domestic navel-gazing." What is your response to this critique?
3. Scenes with Leng's family at a dinner party and at Jiale's grandfather's grave provide both a bit of back story and insight into the present. Analyze the function of these particular sequences. What do we know about Terry's past?
4. Consider the significance of the final image (shot in 4:3 Academy ratio) seen during the closing credits in relation to the mantra of the bogus religious leader.