

# Rockin' and Rollin' in Their Graves: 'Colma: The Musical'

The musical comedy has come a long way since Gene Kelly in the 1950s. The latest evolution can be found in Richard Wong and H.P. Mendoza's *Colma: The Musical*, where one of the leads ends a song by telling a girl where she can stick it, a place that's still censored on most cable channels.

The film follows three 18-year-old high school grads in Colma, that eternally sleepy necropolis south of San Francisco where the dead outnumber the living 1,000 to 1. They struggle to discern their future against the backdrop of an omnipresent fog. Billy follows his dream of being an actor in a local musical while holding down a day job at — where else — Serramonte Shopping Center. Rodel, played by the film's song- and screenwriter H.P. Mendoza, is an angry, sarcastic gay Filipino who feels stifled by Colma life, and Maribel is a vivacious, brazen Filipina who wonders if turning 19 means one has to grow up.

*Colma*, shot over just 18 days in August 2005, is Wong's feature directorial debut. While a musical might not be the first thing one associates with a city of cemeteries, Wong believes that anything has the potential to be a musical.

The film's 13 numbers (all original by Mendoza) are catchy pop gems that sound similar to what's coming out of the Bay Area Asian indie pop scene these days. In fact, *Colma* was originally written as an indie pop album. The singing is far from spectacular, but it makes the musical numbers seem even more plausible and the characters more endearing.

Many of the cast and crew are Bay Area natives, and the authenticity of the film is palpable, from Maribel's Adidas tracksuit jacket (almost a uniform in South San Francisco) to the Colma BART station and the gray skies in nearly every shot. "We finally got an In 'n Out burger next to a Krispy Kreme," Rodel and Billy sing in the opening number.

The best thing about the film is that, far from being cheesy or trying too hard, it's self-conscious about being a musical. In one scene, the two male leads sing using a car alarm as a backbeat. In another scene, when Maribel asks the guys what they have been doing, Billy replies off-handedly, "Oh, we were just singing." Perhaps the film doesn't feel like a typical musical because Wong cites films like *Fargo* and *Rushmore* as *Colma*'s indirect influences.

Wong insists the musical genre is going through a renaissance. "It's having to reinvent itself for a generation who thinks people bursting out in song is 'gay' or uncool," Wong said. Wong says musicals simply have to adapt, and *Colma* is his vision of the 21st-century musical. "It's unapologetically a musical, but I don't feel like the singing feels unnatural to the world it creates," he said. "It's simply a part of it and I think it lets the viewer buy into it unobtrusively."

— Lisa Wong Macabasco

*Colma: The Musical* is directed by Richard Wong. USA, 2006, 111 minutes. English. Tuesday, March 21, 9 p.m., Kabuki 8 Theatres, 1881 Post Street



APA/CANADIAN NARRATIVE

## Rigodon

Directed by Sari Lluich Dalena and Keith Sicat  
Philippines, 2005, 90 minutes  
Tagalog with English subtitles

Sunday, March 19, 8:00 p.m., Kabuki 8 Theatres, 1881 Post Street (at Fillmore), San Francisco



*Rigodon* follows the spiritual journeys of three Filipino immigrants whose lives intertwine in post-9/11 New York, the age of racial profiling and government crackdowns.

Amado, the fighter, is too old to continue boxing in his native land, so he comes to America to battle the harsh reality of living as an immigrant, still dreaming of the family he left behind.

Salome, the dreaming war-bride, has been married to an American husband for 10 years, but visions haunt her as she pursues her American dream of starting a family.

Dante, the rebel-poet, has helped his *kababayan* (fellow countrymen) for over a decade, supplying fake "working" papers, aka social security card and birth certificate. But who will help him in his time of need?

The film's poetic cinematic language meditates on the beauty and realities of what it means to pursue the American dream. *Rigodon* is a group dance that has two concentric circles of dancers moving in opposite directions, resulting in new partnerships as the circles rotate.

Filmmaker Sari Lluich Dalena is a Fulbright scholar pursuing an MA in Film Production at New York University. Co-creator Keith Sicat began his career in the arts focusing on the visual mediums of painting and photography long before falling in love with cinema.

*Rigodon* dancing was introduced to the Philippines by Spanish colonizers during their 300-year rule.

Originally for peasants, the dance was acquired by wealthy Filipinos and soon became a symbol of the upper class.

—Lorraine Mallare

APA/CANADIAN NARRATIVE

## Eve & the Fire Horse

Directed by Julia Kwan  
Canada, 2005, 92 minute  
Cantonese with English subtitles

Saturday, March 18, 2:30 p.m., Kabuki 8 Theatres, 1881 Post Street (at Fillmore), San Francisco  
Monday, March 20, 7:30 p.m., Kabuki 8 Theatres

First-time feature writer-director Julia Kwan delivers a charming period film with *Eve & the Fire Horse*, a Sundance Film Festival award winner. By adopting a narrative and visual style rooted in magical realism, Kwan evinces a world of whimsy and wonder through the Asian belief systems of two children living in '70s North America.

Nine-year-old Eve (Phoebe Jojo Kut) is an imaginative girl whose 1966 fire horse birth sign marks her as a strong-willed young soul. Her slightly older sister Karena (Holly Lo) seems more grounded, but everything in their immigrant Chinese-Canadian family changes after their pregnant mother (Vivian Wu) chops down the backyard apple tree, inviting bad luck. When she miscarries and the girls' beloved grandma passes away unexpectedly, Eve and Karena begin to ask fundamental life and death questions.

Influenced by her grandmother's heritage, Eve thinks that her new goldfish may be the old woman's reincarnation, while Karena takes an intense interest in Christianity after an encounter with door-to-door missionaries. Their Buddhist mom approves of both daughters' emerging spiritualities, asserting that "two gods in the house are better than one," but as Karena and Eve struggle with their newfound convictions, the kids develop a volatile mix of faith and fantasy.

Kwan's engaging storyline enhances the girls' spiritual quest with a series of fantasy sequences involving singing goldfish, cavorting deities and ghostly visitations. Standout performances by Kut and Lo ably supported by the adult cast and a spot-on '70s-era atmosphere, make *Eve* a sure delight.

—Justin Lowe



CENTERPIECE PRESENTATION

## Water

Directed by Deepa Mehta  
Canada, 2005, 114 minutes  
Hindi with English subtitles

Sunday, March 19, 6:00 p.m., Castro Theatre, 429 Castro Street (at Market), San Francisco

The prolific history of filmmaking in India has roots far beyond the flirtatious choreography of Bollywood. From Harishchandra Bhatvadekar's pioneering short films of the late 1800s to the heady *masala* (mixed spice) movies of the '70s, Indian cinema continues to thrive in the global celluloid market today by churning out magnificent works such as *Water*, the last of Deepa Mehta's trilogy.

The timeline begins in 1938 India, an unsettling time under British colonial rule when Gandhi's "Quit India" movement of civil disobedience was at its peak. Chuyia (Sarala) is an eight-year-old girl who is widowed even though she

has no recollection of ever being married. According to ancient texts of the Laws of Manu, she must exile herself under deprived conditions by living in a "widow house," in order to avoid her options, including being burned in the husband's funeral pyre or marrying the brother-in-law.

A predictable romance ensues between the super gorgeous Kalyani (Lisa Ray), one of Chuyia's fellow widows, and the handsome Narayan (John Abraham), her determined lover and a crusader of Gandhi's cause. There is also a treat for any *Bandit Queen* fans, as Seema Biswas wonderfully plays the role of Shakuntala, providing a spell of melancholy and victory that holds the film together.

*Water* contains an intelligence like that of Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy*, addressing in poetic fashion some of the sordid realities of India's poverty, social caste system, religious theosophies and the struggle for existence. Replete with beautiful raindrops and characters with auspicious names, *Water* not only provides purifying symbolism through amazing cinematography, but also accompanies the sacred landscape with a lush soundtrack.

—Annabelle A. Udo

