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The Alternative at Berlin's Film Fest

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By J. S. MARCUS

The red carpet at the Berlinale Palast, the main venue of the Berlin Film Festival, has been the center of the movie universe this week, with A-list luminaries like director Martin Scorsese and Hollywood funnyman Ben Stiller walking up its camera-lined way to world premiers of their latest films.

But there is no red carpet at the screenings of the festival's alternative section, known as the Forum, where many of the festival's best and most unusual films have been shown.

The Berlin Film Festival, which celebrated its 60th anniversary this year, has traditionally been thought of as more adventuresome than its rival European festivals in Cannes and Venice. In previous decades, the main section, known as the Competition, has awarded its highest prize, the Golden Bear, to such cinema mavericks as Rainer Werner Fassbinder or John Cassavetes.



View Full Image Beta Cinema Brian Wong, Lawrence Ko, Bo-Syuan Wang and Chin Lun Hsia in 'Au Revoir Taipei.'

These days, the festival's signature section seems more content to highlight prestigious big-budget films like Mr. Scorsese's eagerly awaited psycho-thriller "Shutter Island," or the "The Ghost Writer," a political thriller directed by Roman Polanski -- films that left many festival critics and audiences disappointed.

Meanwhile, over at the Forum section, audiences have been captivated by two breakout first features by young Asian directors, whose films had their international premiers in the anonymous cineplexes

surrounding the Berlinale Palast, where most of the festival actually takes place. "Au Revoir Taipei" is a warmhearted romantic comedy by American-Taiwanese director Arvin Chen; and "I'm in Trouble!" a subtle, beautifully realized comedy by South Korean director So Sang-min, is an insightful portrait of life in contemporary Seoul.

In prior decades, movies like Mr. Chen's -- which expertly brings together an eclectic range of cinematic influences, ranging from the humanistic Taiwanese films of Edward Yang to the French Nouvelle Vague of the 1950s and '60s -- might not have seemed so different from films in the Competition section, says German director Wim Wenders, who served as an executive producer on "Au Revoir Taipei." Mr. Wenders, who won the Palme d'Or at Cannes for his 1984 film "Paris, Texas," has participated in both the Forum and Competition sections at the Berlin Film Festival.

"The fact that the Forum and the Competition are so far apart now reflects the reality of our film landscape," says Mr. Wenders, speaking just before the official premier of "Au Revoir Taipei." "The commercial blockbuster movie is really separated by a big gap from the mass of fantastic films that don't really have access to cinemas anymore. For many of them, the Forum is the only chance to get seen and maybe leap up into a different category."



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Like Mr. Chen, So Sang-min, defers to the great directors of the French New Wave, but his particular influence is surprising -- Eric Rohmer, the master of the long shot, who died earlier this year at the age of 89. "I'm in Trouble!" tells the story of a slacker poet named Sun-woo (played by Min Sung-wook), stuck on the fringes of Seoul's career-driven society. Sun-woo -- who consistently, and usually drunkenly, disappoints his upstanding girlfriend Yuna -- is hilarious, and maddening, and ultimately very human. Mr. So chronicles each and every one of Sun-woo's moral failings with Rohmer-like precision.

"Privately, I admire someone like the lawyer," says Mr. So, 32 years old, of a minor hardworking character who briefly appears toward the end of the movie, making a sharp contrast with the feckless Sun-woo. "I want to be a person like him, but I more resemble someone like Sun-woo -- who is living deep inside me."



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Berlinale

'Sunny Land'

Both Messrs. Chen and So depict the 20-somethings of contemporary Asian societies, who, in Mr. Chen's words, "are people who don't know what they want." However, the differences are striking. The Seoul of "I'm in Trouble!" is marked by personal despair and an almost neurotic fear of failure; while Mr. Chen's Taipei is filled with what Mr. Chen calls "lost and silly young people."

Mr. Chen's vision of Taipei, he says, is of "a city where there are no bad guys" -- a city lit by TV sets, convenience-store neon and

floating lanterns. "Any dumb guy and girl can fall in love," in his Taipei, says the California native, who relocated permanently to Taiwan after film school in Los Angeles. Both films will compete for the festival's prize for best first feature, to be awarded, along with this year's Golden Bear, on Saturday night at the Berlinale Palast. One or both may also be repeated over the next few weeks at [Berlin's Arsenal movie theater](#), which annually screens highlights of the Forum festival in late February. And both have been seen by thousands of ordinary moviegoers, who, unlike at Cannes or Venice, are actually the festival's main audience.

The Forum section this year also included an outstanding European documentary, "Nenette," by French filmmaker Nicolas Philibert ("To Be and to Have"), which hypnotically captures the peculiar life of a 40-year-old orangutan living in a Paris zoo. Another European documentary, "Sunny Land," uses a range of archival footage and newly shot sequences, held together by a fictional narration, to tell the story of the 1970s South African resort, Sun City. A symbol of the apartheid system, but also a place that offered a refuge from its tyranny, Sun City proves a powerful cinematic subject. Conceived by two first-time Berlin filmmakers, Aljoscha Weskott and Marietta Kesting, "Sunny Land" breaks down barriers between video art and the documentary. While hardly perfect, it is often unforgettable.

"We are here to prove that there is an interested audience for independent films that don't just have entertainment value," says Christoph Terhechte, head of the Forum section. "And we are proving that every day with packed theaters."

—J.S. Marcus is a writer based in Berlin.

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