

SCANDALOUS SURPRISE

Untold Scandal

Directed by J-yong E

Review by Darcy Paquet

Eighteenth-century epistolary novels aren't generally the inspiration for films that get record-breaking opening weekends at the box-office. This rule is no less true in Korea than in other countries, but 2003 was a year of surprises.

After a resounding flop with his second film *Asako in Ruby Shoes* in 2001, director J-yong E has taken French novelist Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons*

Dangereuses and moved it not forward in time — as with the 1999 Hollywood film *Cruel Intentions* — but laterally to the other side of the planet to Korea's Chosun Dynasty. This weird fusion of 18th century French and Korean cultures has resulted in a stimulating and convincing adaptation. It's not hard to imagine a



hypocritical and double-faced Chosun society that could rival the characters in Laclos' book.

First: If you've seen Stephen Frears' *Dangerous Liaisons* or read the original novel, then don't buy *Untold Scandal* expecting major departures in the plot. The basic narrative and characteriza-

tion are more or less the same, with only small adjustments made to broker a neat fit with 18th-century Korean society. Instead, approach the film as you would a new, contemporary staging of your favorite classic play. You've already memorized your favorite lines, but you'd like to experience it again and see what the new setting will do for the overall effect.

The new setting in *Untold Scandal* is striking. The vibrant, gently clashing colors of the costumes and sets give a visual counterpoint to the sensuality of the story. Sex scenes — far more explicit than in previous film adaptations — collide with our preconceived images of old Korea. In contrast, the movements of the characters in day-to-

day life are elegant in their restraint, echoing the strict moral code of Chosun society around which our characters must negotiate. The dialogue is also elegant and rich in color, an extra bonus for native speakers of Korean.

A recent internet poll posed the question of why the film was so commercially successful (over three million admissions nationwide), and respondents gave primary credit to the cast. The movie's women are proven acting talents: Mi-Sook Lee, star of the 1980s (in such films as Chang-ho Bae's *Whale Hunting*) who resurrected her career with director E's first film *An Affair* (1998), has already earned a Best Actress citation from the Korean Critics Awards for her portrayal of Lady Cho (the "Glenn Close character"). She has more than enough poise, presence and sensuality to excel in the role.

Chameleon Do-yeon Jeon, known for choosing widely diverse roles and playing them all equally well, takes the film's most serious part, and gives it great depth. Most atten-

tion was focused on male lead Yong-joon Bae. Having reached the pinnacle of fame in the TV drama sector with his clean-cut, nice-boy image, he surprised many people by landing such a risqué part for his cinematic debut. Some predicted disaster; he actually pulled off the part better than expected, though in many ways he is overshadowed by the women in the film. *Memories of John Malkovich* also set a high standard to live up to.

If *Scandal* is primarily about execution, however, then director J-yong E must be given the most credit. He keeps a familiar story interesting by virtue of unexpected juxtapositions (for example in the soundtrack, a mix of classical European and Korean music), visual elegance, and efficient storytelling. He stays true to the spirit of the original novel while giving it an entirely new aesthetic. More than anything else, this film is entertaining. Not intended as an art film, *Scandal* is a notable example of fashioning a modern-day blockbuster from a completely unexpected set of ingredients. ●