

Perfect horror

New film, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* reaches theaters in the U.S.

With this, the third film of his "Vengeance trilogy," director Chan-wook Park has done what, arguably, no American director has done in the last 20 years or more; he has made three excellent films in a row. That's three films more artful than any hat trick pounded out by M. Night Shyamalan, more consistent than Whit Stillman's *Metropolitan/Barcelona/Last Days of Disco* trip-tych, and don't even bother mentioning Quentin Tarantino.

Park's much-touted film festival favorites *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and *Oldboy* gave *Lady Vengeance* much to live up to. The film is cut from the same cloth as its predecessors in its overarching themes of retribution and the insubstantial "redemption" that comes of it, and is full of the same lush, nearly monochromatic, hyper-patterned interiors (the wall and floor treatments in Park's movies deserve pages unto themselves).

Many of the same actors make appearances, although some of them for literally no more than a few seconds: Three characters, Ji-tae Yu, Ha-Kyun Shin and Kang-ho Song, who had significant roles in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, appear fleetingly as an adult apparition of a murdered child, and as a pair of hired hitmen. But it is Yeoung-ae Lee — well known to Korean television audiences as the star of the period-piece drama serial, *The Jewel in the Palace* (*Dae Jang Geum*, reviewed last issue) who created a stir in breaking free of her "sweetheart" image to play the transcendently sad, grievous angel/witch Geum-Ja Lee.

The transgressions of Geum-Ja's youth have led her to a terrible place. Pregnant at 19, she takes refuge with a former teacher, Mr. Baek, who coerces her into assisting him in the kidnapping of a five-year-old boy. It's only for the money, Mr. Baek tells Geum-Ja; there are "good kidnappings," and the child's emotional bond to his family will be strengthened when he is returned. But the child's crying bothers Mr. Baek; he kills the boy, and then takes Geum-Ja's infant daughter hostage, telling Geum-Ja that unless she falsely confesses to the murder of the little boy, her own



Actress Yeoung-ae Lee as Geum-Ja Lee in *Lady Vengeance*.

baby will come to harm.

Geum-Ja confesses; her face, extraordinary in its look of innocence, becomes the focus of the tabloid press. The public finds her beautiful (like Olivia Hussey, is the rather surprising comparison); polka-dotted dresses like the kind she wore on the day of her arrest become the vogue.

Geum-Ja re-enacts the murder of the little boy for a phalanx of reporters and photographers, while Mr. Baek stands by malevolently, Geum-Ja's baby in an infant carrier across his chest. Desperate to be convicted, Geum-Ja, who was not present for the murder of the little boy, nevertheless performs it correctly, with silent cues from the investigating detective. She spends 13 years for the crime in a women's prison. There is a slumber-party atmosphere to the bright pink communal cell, with its cheery striped floor cushions, but it is a prison nonetheless, sad and sordid, and Geum-Ja spends her time there conniving, plotting, ingratiating, and swooning in the ecstasy of her own "prayer."

Upon her release, to those who know no better, Geum-Ja is a model of spiritual rehabilitation, thanks to a suitor/pastor who looks like a Korean Peter Lorre with a Prince Valiant haircut. But while imprisoned, Geum-Ja has placed many in her debt. She has made particularly good use of the women whose release dates are near her own. Geum-Ja is ready to rejoin society, and she will rejoin it with a plan.

The director displays some ambivalence on the subject of the international adoption of Korean children in *Lady Vengeance*. Geum-Ja's daughter, since adopted by an Australian couple, is first seen sitting alone on the Outback looking up into a sky in which the clouds form the words YOU HAVE NO MOTHER. When Geum-Ja arrives in Australia, to find and meet her birthdaughter Jenny, she gets appallingly drunk with the Australian couple in their garish, gilt-and-pastel home, while Jenny sits stonily in front of the television, once again, alone.

Although the child hears her adop-



tive mother gush to Geum-Ja about how she is their entire world. Jenny, without hesitation, demands to return to Seoul with Geum-Ja. Their inability to understand one another and their insistence upon trying is touching; Geum-Ja's fumbling attempts at nurture lead to the most gratuitous cruelty, thankfully offscreen, that this film offers.

If Park portrays the adoptive Australian parents as capricious and gaudy, he takes an even heavier hand with the supposedly-sterile Mr. Baek. Mr. Baek teaches English to kindergartners by day, and then deals with his own sterility by torturing, videotaping, and murdering young children from other classrooms. He has also, in the years since his meeting with Geum-Ja, found a wife. She is, unbeknownst to Baek, an ex-prisonmate of Geum-Ja's. The pieces of the plan are falling into place.

Min-sik Choi — who played the lead role of Dae-su Oh in Park's *Oldboy* — is the terrible Mr. Baek. He is like Gary Oldman in his ability to appear hapless and middle-aged one moment, unrepentantly evil the next. Once taken into Geum-Ja's custody, he concedes — while tied to a chair with a gun to his head, still wearing his kindergarten-teacher teddybear necktie — to translate a conversation between Geum-Ja and Jenny. It is the best opportunity they have had to understand one another, although it is facilitated by the man who destroyed them.

Jenny does not forgive Geum-Ja for "dumping" her, and it is the Australian parents, silly as they may look, who resolutely travel to Korea to find Jenny and take her home again. The final, tragicomic

scene of the film illustrates clearly that while Jenny may like and care for Geum-Ja, she realizes that life with her birthmother is not likely to be a very stable one.

It is an interesting commentary on family structure in Korea that the parents of the murdered children, upon being confronted with the identity of their children's captor, cannot fathom what Baek, a childless man, did with the ransom money. What could a man without a child need all that money for? (Geum-Ja informs them that he was saving up to buy a yacht; the entire room reacts with an exhalation of hopeless shock.) The videotapes of the children begging for their lives are nearly unwatchable.

But with their parents — like with her fellow inmates from prison — Geum-Ja manages, using intense and feminine precision, to organize revenge exponentially more potent than any she could have inflicted alone. Like the detective who aided her in making the false confession that led to her incarceration, these parents may later have their own actions to regret.

Central to the film is the character of Geum-Ja. What is it about her that compels people to help her, or forces them to do her bidding? Her beautiful face, portrayed at times with a beatific nimbus around it, is also capable of greater horror, greater ugliness, than any makeup could enhance. While she readies and carries out her plan, she wears a red eye-shadow that all around her comment upon; when she has completed her mission, she removes it, but the split lip she has suffered remains to mar her saintly features.

In the end, everything in *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* comes together — impeccable performances, a spellbinding story, gorgeous cinematography, abject horror, surreal humor, a wonderful soundtrack and an artful opening credit sequence. All combine to make this film virtually beyond reproach. ●

Sympathy for Lady Vengeance is being shown at selected theaters across the country and is also available on DVD from www.seoulselection.com and www.yeondvd.com