

January 20, 2012

Specialty screenings: 'Norwegian Wood' and 'My Reincarnation'

Michael Phillips

Movie critic

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'Norwegian Wood' -- 2 1/2 stars

In college we begin to will ourselves into our adult skin, however ill-fitting. Writers adore this subject, this time of exquisite romantic suffering. In his 1987 novel "Norwegian Wood" — the "Love Story" of Japan, a little higher up the quality scale — Haruki Murakami created a hugely popular work of young love, lyrical and death-haunted. Directed by Vietnamese native Tran Anh Hung, "Norwegian Wood" contains some beautiful moments, dominated as much by reeds in the wind or rain on a windowpane as the faces of the leading characters.

Tran made "The Scent of Green Papaya," a film that is gorgeous as well as dramatically expressive. His latest is merely gorgeous. I confess I struggled with Murakami's novel on the page, and the struggle continued for me with the film version, though its craftsmanship is considerable and the score by Jonny Greenwood often startles with its intense swoons of feeling. University student Watanabe (Kenichi Matsuyama) glides through his days and romantic attachments, his feeling for Naoko (Rinko Kikuchi of "Babel"), the longtime friend of a suicidal mutual acquaintance, both sustaining and undermining his heart.

Other women, notably Midori (Kiko Mizuhara), offer alternatives. "It's complicated," he keeps saying, trying to put his connection to Naoko into words. The film puts that connection into images, in all weather, and in unusually supple digital video imagery courtesy of cinematographer Mark Lee Ping Bin. "Norwegian Wood" has it all. Everything, that is, except a way of making Watanabe a three-dimensional protagonist, something more than a conduit for everything that happens to him and around him.

No MPAA rating. Running time: 2:13. Plays Friday-Thursday at Music Box Theatre. In Japanese with English subtitles.

'My Reincarnation' -- 3 stars

Sometimes breadth is enough in a documentary, and documentary filmmaker Jennifer Fox spans a full 20 years in the account of how the Italian-born son of a Tibetan Buddhist master found his rightful place in his father's calling.

Fox was working as Chogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche's secretary when she met his son, Yeshe. The boy was 18, not quite a man, and not happy with his emotionally distant relationship with Rinpoche. Conventionally made, "My Reincarnation" is nonetheless a graceful and moving report of a father and a son learning to understand one another better. Early on, Rinpoche mutters on-camera about having had a dream last night. "What did you dream?" he's asked. "Something," he replies, cryptically. Rinpoche acts as spiritual parent to many, though not much of a real parent to his birth son (which he acknowledges). As time goes by, and Yeshe becomes a father himself, "My Reincarnation" travels from Italy to Tibet and from frustration to, yes, something like enlightenment.

No MPAA rating (no objectionable material). Running time: 1:22. Plays through Feb. 2 at Facets Cinematheque.

— [Michael Phillips](#)

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