

Film Review

eve and the fire horse



Julia Kwan. *Eve and the Fire Horse*. Golden Horse Productions (starring Vivian Wu and Phoebe Kut), 2005.

Reviewed by Tara Kolton

A refreshing departure from so much of the escapist fantasy of modern, mainstream children's cinema, *Eve and the Fire Horse* follows a young Chinese girl's naïve and magical romp through the tangled webs of religion (specifically Catholicism) in 1970s Vancouver. Director Julia Kwan's debut feature offers a fresh take on religion in a multicultural society as seen through the eyes of its enthusiastic young protagonists.

As the film begins, the nine-year-old Eve explains (through voiceover) that she was born in the year of the fire horse, the sign said to produce the most troublesome children amongst the Chinese zodiac. Also bearing that most biblically symbolic of female names, Eve is at once caught between the worlds of Chinese cultural tradition and religious fantasy. Certainly, Eve bears the weight of a guilt she never willingly assumed. Indeed as sisters Karena (age 11) and Eve become immersed in Catholicism (in addition to their family's informally practiced Buddhist traditions), Eve seems destined to fulfill her role as the doomed menace in her family and social world. In the children's religious fanaticism, fear, and exclusion at Sunday school we can see reflected a fundamentalist approach to religion and tradition that condemns even the most innocent; Eve, condemned by her birth year and moniker, is forced to assume the role of scapegoat of whichever religious or cultural discourse she attempts to reside in.

At its heart, the film is one that examines the inevitable process of youth reacting to first-time life and faith-shattering tragedy; Karena and Eve's mother suffers a miscarriage and their beloved, live-in grandmother (certainly their closest tie to Chinese and Buddhist traditions) passes away. That this death spurs both guilt in Eve and a desire in Karena to believe in a heaven beyond their world raises a quite concise implication: that so often it is fear, guilt, and self-motivation which lies at the root of the most faithful uptake of religion. As such, after reading a book on Christianity which offers the promise of multicultural harmony in the heavens above, Karena chooses to adopt the religion which most suits her own desires. Meanwhile Eve hopes to latch onto the finer points of both Christianity and Buddhism, as well as her own vivid fantasies about each.

After the girls' father leaves for a trip to China, their somber mother May (Vivian Wu) enrolls them in a Catholic Sunday school program, figuring that two religions in the household are better than one. Karena and Eve quickly adopt quite opposite attitudes towards Catholicism; Karena serious and steadfast in her commitment, becomes devoted to most literally assuming Catholicism and rejecting Buddhism and her family traditions, while Eve tackles Catholicism with a youthful playfulness and idealism.

While *Eve and the Fire Horse* falters a little in its over-use of Eve's voiceover and occasionally leads us heavily-handedly towards certain emotional moments, Kwan always steers away from overly obvious or saccharine territory. Kwan offers no clear-cut answers or declarations; Eve doesn't have to make sense of religion, but is ultimately rewarded by the joy and confusion that comes with questioning, experimenting, and using her imagination. In one scene, Eve imagines her new goldfish to be her grandmother reincarnated, and it briefly springs into traditional Chinese song and dance before her.

Perhaps it *should* be over-the-top to see Eve dancing around the living room with Jesus and the Buddha, but the imaginative glee with which the fantasy takes place only brings the viewer to smile—after all, why shouldn't they dance together? Neither religion is condemned or promoted above the other, but as we watch the figures come to life and unite in dance with Eve, we are forced to question just how different the 'good' of each religion is. How easy does it become to forget the charity and good promoted by Christianity in turn for the assumption of guilt and exclusion? In *Eve and the Fire Horse*, religion as viewed through the eyes of these children reminds us how easy it is to misread religious discourse to fit our own desires and fears, whether used for positive inspiration, or used to isolate and condemn others.

That the film leaves the children's questions about religion open and perhaps even provokes its viewers to discover religion on their own terms and to question narratives which are imposed on them, is certainly unique amongst mainstream children's cinema. Kwan is concerned with the eagerness of children to believe in *something*, yet returns to the pointed notion that so often the adoption of any belief comes as a result of some sort of self-motivated desire or fear. That Kwan pulls off this intelligent, family friendly film with such charm and humor is nothing short of magical. ☺