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Film in Review; 'Face'

By DANA STEVENS

Opens today in New York

Directed by Bertha Bay-Sa Pan

Not rated, 87 minutes

A meditation on the conflict between family loyalties and personal ambition, "Face" is the kind of independent film that can feel slight on a first viewing. But like its original soundtrack -- a streetwise blend of hip-hop, Chinese opera and American and Asian pop songs -- it is likely to remain in your head long afterward.

Kim (played by the exquisite Bai Ling) is a college-age girl in the Queens Chinatown of the 1970's, torn between her traditional upbringing and her dreams of an independent career. After she is raped and impregnated by a spoiled playboy (Will Yun Lee), Kim succumbs to family pressure to marry the scoundrel and bear his child. When the shotgun marriage meets a predictably miserable end, Kim panics, dumps her baby daughter on her loving but inflexible mother (Kieu Chinh) and flees to Hong Kong to start her life over.

A second storyline picks up 19 years later: the daughter, Genie (Kristy Wu), has grown into a rebellious young woman about to graduate from high school. When Kim, now a successful international banker, returns home to attend the ceremony, her arrival unleashes three generations' worth of resentment and misunderstanding.

The hip-hop artist Treach is appealing as an African-American club D.J. who falls for the reluctant Genie, scandalizing her conservative grandmother. But it is the three women, particularly Ms. Chinh as the stubborn, almost preternaturally generous matriarch, who dominate the film.

Ms. Ling, who has been typecast as the gorgeously inscrutable Asian in American adventure films (in last year's "Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow," she was billed only as "Mysterious Woman"), shows tremendous range as the guilt-ridden mother; her performance convincingly spans 20 years without need of much help from the makeup department. Ms. Wu, late of "Buffy the

Vampire Slayer," pulls off the neat trick of being simultaneously sullen and radiant as the conflicted daughter who is resentful of her grandmother's eagle eye yet lovingly concerned for the old woman's safety.

The film's pacing is confusing at times -- in particular, the transitions between flashbacks and the present day can be choppy and difficult to follow -- but the director's attention to details of character and locale makes for a precise evocation of a New York seldom seen in feature films.

DANA STEVENS

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