

OLD STONE (2016) ♂♂♂

D: Johnny Ma. Gang Chen, Nai An, Zebin Zhang, Xue'er Luo. 80 mins. (Kino Lorber) 1/18

Old Stone has been called the Chinese **Taxi Driver**, but while Lao Shi (Chen) may be a cabbie, he's no Travis Bickle. In fact, he may be the most decent and reasonable character in the film—not that it gets him very far. That's the ultimate point of writer/director Ma's "no good deed" fable of futility and frustration. Lao Shi's troubles commence when an arm-grab by a drunken fare causes him to lose control of the wheel and smash into an unsuspecting bicyclist. Lao Shi does the right thing, rushing the badly injured stranger to a nearby hospital without, as protocol dictates, waiting for the police to arrive. Lao Shi saves the man's life but at a literal heavy cost: according to Chinese law, the cabbie is required to pay the victim's hospital bills; if the accident had been fatal, Lao Shi could have walked away with a full wallet. While his wife and daughter fret as his meager savings dwindle, Lao Shi seeks satisfaction from local authorities, insurance companies, even the arrogant rich drunk who'd caused the crash—all to no avail. Ma piles on the ironies in this keen psychological thriller till the viewer feels almost as crazed as our thwarted protag and brings his trim tale to a logical if grim conclusion. Chen is outstanding at the put-upon Lao Shi as he pendulates between benign and malevolent options, while composer Lee Sanders drives the action with an excellent score topped by a memorable Scottish-tinged outro instrumental. Extras include behind-the-scenes footage, deleted scenes, the Johnny Ma short film **Grand Canal**, and trailer.

RIDGE RUNNERS (2018) ♂♂♂

D: Hunter West. Jennica Schwartzman, Austin Haley, Christopher Howell, Jason Thompson, Charlee Graham, Katherine Forbes. 81 mins. (Indican Pictures) 2/18

An identity quest wrapped in a police procedural, West's intriguing indie casts Schwartzman as Rachel Willow, a small-time cop with a decided lack of conviction re her calling. Rachel's wavering commitment to her "depressing" profession is challenged when a 12-year-old girl goes missing and rumors of human trafficking (or "white slavery" in the exploitative nomenclature of yore) arise. After questioning several locals, including the absent child's concerned but essentially trashy mater Maddie (Graham), Rachel and her senior partner Rob Shepherd (Haley), with whom she's having a decidedly lackluster illicit affair, follow clues leading to the auto racetrack where Maddie works, an establishment owned by seedy hustler Clayton (Thompson), whose main source of income derives from running guns, drugs and now, it's suspected, young girls. Even in the tepid

heat of their investigation, 31-year-old Rachel, who lives with her mom (Forbes), takes time out for a job interview (!) at an insurance firm while her partner waits in the car. West and writer Austin Lott capture an authentic slice of mundane but often dangerous off-road American life, while the principal thespians, led by Schwartzman, are convincing in their roles as area residents ranging from cops to Christians to criminals. On the downside, **Ridge Runners** suffers from a sometimes suffocating surfeit of basic cable TV therapy talk, with characters ready to discuss, dissect and disseminate their "feelings" at the drop of a tear. Even the chief lowlife villain indulges in this irritating vice, questioning his own motives ("maybe I was abused as a child") to the bound and gagged juvenile captive in the back of his pickup. Rachel and Rob, meanwhile, are in desperate need of channeling their inner Bronson as their energy levels fail to match those of their foes, though dogged determination ultimately wins out. In sum, action and exploitation fans may find **Ridge Runners** slim pickings, but in the end the filmmakers' naturalistic approach succeeds in painting an alarmingly credible picture of the banality of evil and good alike.

—*The Phantom*

TRUE LOVE WAYS (2015) ♂♂♂ 1/2

D: Mathieu Seiler. Anna Hausberg, David C. Bunnars, Kai Michael Muller, Michael Greiling, Axel Hartwig. 102 mins. (MVD Visual) 4/18

Jimmy Fallon used to sing a song about an "Idiot Boyfriend" who gave his girl a Norelco beard trimmer with his name on it. Severine (Hausberg), a beautiful young German woman, should be so lucky. Her foolish live-in, Tom (Muller), accepts an elegant stranger's (Bunnars) offer to stage her kidnapping, so he can play the hero. What could go wrong? Seiler's script provides the answers in a tale that deftly combines chauvinist titillation with feminist fury. In other words, the type of feature that Harvey Weinstein and Rose Mc-Gowan could have collaborated on, were they still on speaking terms. Inevitably, one will focus on the director/author's sexual politics but miss his class consciousness. Chef, the stranger, produces sexual snuff films for a haute bourgeois clientele, including a police official (Greiling) with sinister secrets. Tom deems Chef trustworthy because he meets him at an upscale bar. Two able young Germans are introduced to the American audience. Muller plays the po-mo bobo bozo so convincingly that his next starring project should be **The Justin Trudeau Story**. Hausberg is an attractive and talented actress who is ready for Hollywood, having "paid her dues." Serious offers, comic possibilities—sincere proposals only.

—**Ronald Charles Epstein**

THE UNKNOWN GIRL (2016) ♂♂♂

D: Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Luc Dardenne. Adele Haenel, Olivier Bonnard, Louka Minnella, Christelle Cornil, Yves Larec. 113 mins. (MPI Media) 12/17

TRUE LOVE WAYS



As in their earlier crime-centric drama **Lorna's Silence** (VS #74), veteran Euro art-house siblings the Dardennes craft a spare moral fable set against the background of a drab Belgian city, in this case the smaller urban center of Liege. Again, a young woman—homegrown doctor Jenny Davin (Haenel) replacing Lorna's struggling East European immigrant (Arta Dobroshti)—serves as a protagonist who's caught in an ethical dilemma. The humane if somewhat naive Dr. Jenny, as she's affectionately known among her appreciative patients, has just taken over retiring physician Dr. Habran's (Larec) practice. An emergency case keeps her and insecure intern Julien (Bonnard) late at the office, where, in their haste, they ignore a downstairs buzzer. When subsequent security tapes reveal the caller as a desperate young black woman who soon after met a violent death, Jenny is wracked with guilt and grows determined to learn the Jane Doe's name and identify the culprit responsible for her demise. Though Jenny seems a bit ill-equipped to conduct so gritty an investigation, and local detectives warn her away from any such attempts, she's nothing if not quietly persistent in her mission, questioning patients, potential witnesses and even dangerous lowlifes in a bid to solve the mystery. The very flatness of the Dardennes' gray-skied mise en scene works to keep their central themes of chance, guilt and responsibility in bold relief, and, despite her own low-key nature, Haenel's Jenny easily enlists viewers to her cause. While ultimately a somber affair (with a few more details re her medical treatments than we needed to see), **The Unknown Girl** reps a worthwhile experience for patient viewers. ♂

—*The Phantom*