

The gift of 'A Simple Life'

By ANTONIO D. SISON

A purpose-driven expression etched on her face, an elderly lady known as Ah Tao makes her way through the Hong Kong street market. In her left hand is a basketful of fresh produce, in her right, a plastic bag bearing live fish.

As she reaches a vegetable stall, the vendors anticipate her arrival with amusement. They welcome her warmly and ask her what she needs. "Garlic," she responds. Obviously a regular, she dons a coat, puts on a pair of prescription eyeglasses, and enters the walk-in refrigerator. Like a seasoned chef out shopping for premium ingredients, she meticulously examines pieces of peeled garlic and puts the chosen few in a bag.

Ah Tao is a Hong Kong *amah*, a stay-in domestic servant, who has been in the service of a Chinese family for more than 60 years. Today, she only serves the middle-aged bachelor Roger, the sole family member who has not migrated to the United States.

At the dining room of Roger's compact apartment, a special, multicourse seafood lunch awaits him, but his expressionless face indicates that this is nothing outside of the ordinary. Mechanically, he puts out his hand, knowing that Ah Tao will be ready to serve him a bowl of rice. He wolfs down the meal but offers neither affirmation, nor simple thanks, to the cook who went through great lengths to prepare it. The only words he utters before he leaves for work are, "I haven't had ox tongue in a while."

Lensed by veteran Hong Kong director Ann Hui, the aptly titled "A Simple Life" is based on the true story of film producer Roger Lee and his family's *amah*, Chung Chun-Tao. Hui ferries the material from real to reel by way of straightforward storytelling, unforced character development, and emotional restraint.

The predictable routine of everyday life is disrupted when, without warning, Ah Tao suffers a stroke. Not want-



—China Lion Entertainment

Andy Lau and Deanie Ip in "A Simple Life"

ing to be a burden, she makes a firm decision to move into an assisted-living home.

If adversity reveals a person's true character, the personal tragedy that befalls Ah Tao awakens Roger's sensitive side, which was normally belied by his apparent self-absorption and stoic veneer.

Realizing Ah Tao's significant place in his life and the impending void of her absence, Roger extends care and support to the woman who had helped raise him from infancy. Visiting her regularly as her "godson," he makes sure her accommodations are satisfactory, spends time in conversation with her, and takes her to restaurant meals. In their times together, the two find solace in the simple cadence of their renegotiated routine.

The film eschews the melodramatic conventions that Hollywood often resorts to given intimate dramas of this sort—no shedding of copious tears, no hugging, no deathless lines. The care and affection between the two leads are inflected in small, tender gestures

during unguarded moments. In one light-hearted scene, Ah Tao and Roger tease each other about their old crushes with a mischievous fondness not unlike kids at play. In another scene, they rummage through Ah Tao's collection of keepsakes, happily rekindling the precious memories they've shared.

The understated sentiment is made more eloquent by the calibrated performances of the actors, most especially Deanie Ip, who so thoroughly disappears into the role of Ah Tao that her moments infuse the film with a documentary feel. She deservedly reaped acting honors for this role from prestigious film festivals, including the Venice International Film Festival's Volpi Cup in 2011.

Asian pop icon Andy Lau is also convincing in his role: His Roger is an enigmatic blend of unsentimentality and heartfelt sensitivity. Having portrayed mother and son in films before, Ip and Lau share a special chemistry that translates beautifully onscreen; their relationship feels authentic.

A number of the film's bright moments take place in the home for the elderly where Ah Tao adjusts to her new living situation and develops meaningful connections. Her transition is not instant, but her natural sensitivity and care for others soon give her a sense of purpose in her new home. She becomes a gracious peacemaker and a generous

friend to her housemates as they deal with the harsh realities of their own lives. When an older lady resident has a spat with her visiting daughter, it is Ah Tao's gentle encouragement that softens her heart so that reconciliation becomes possible. In turn, her new friends offer her the warmth and companionship that she needs.

When Ah Tao's health begins to show signs of progressive deterioration, mortality and the hereafter are realities she and Roger have to face. They do so with a quiet dignity and a serene acceptance. It is only in this latter portion of the film that we are allowed to gain some insight on where the character's centeredness might be rooted—Ah Tao and Roger are Christians. Lying on a hospital bed, and in the company of Roger and a visiting pastor, Ah Tao has the chance to reflect on the meaning of her life through the eyes of faith.

When the pastor quotes the well-known passage from the book of Ecclesiastes—"To everything there is a season ... a time for tears and a time for laughter ..."—Roger and Ah Tao attach their own humorously irreverent lines to it.

"A time for surgery and bile duct dissection," Roger adds teasingly.

"A time for steaming melons, and a time for salted eggs," Ah Tao interjects, half-grimacing in pain through fits of laughter.

It is this paradoxical admixture of light and shade that makes "A Simple Life" such a rewarding viewing experience. At once funny and moving, joyful and melancholic, the film is a truthful portrait of the profound ebb and flow of human life.

An adage from the Spanish church doctor and mystic St. Teresa of Avila meaningfully resonates with Ah Tao's simple life of dedicated service: *Entre los pucheros anda el señor*—"God walks among the pots and pans." As can be drawn from the film's title, "A Simple Life" invites viewers to contemplate the delicate turns of grace in the very ordinariness of life. Here, grace does not so much enter into the picture in the dramatic form of a burning bush as it does small servings of manna, the blessings of a life lived one day at a time. A simple life is, quite simply, a gift.

[Precious Blood Br. Antonio D. Sison is author of the book *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human* (2012), and a faculty member at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. "A Simple Life" is available on DVD and Blu-ray from Well Go USA Entertainment.]

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Avalanche crashes into family ideal

In Swedish film 'Force Majeure,' nature's disaster is just the beginning

By ANTONIO D. SISON

At first glance, the climactic scene in the Swedish film "Force Majeure" recalls a blockbuster disaster flick. An avalanche, gathering power and mass as it rolls down the slopes of the French Alps, threatens to make a catastrophic landing on a posh ski resort where tourists are enjoying their lunch.

"It's controlled. They know what they're doing," Tomas (Johannes Bah Kuhnke) smugly reassures his wife, Ebba (Lisa Loven Kongsli), and their two kids (Clara and Vincent Wettergren), knowing that resorts routinely conduct artificially induced release measures to pre-empt potentially disastrous avalanches.

But Tomas' certitude crumbles by the second as the white monster gets closer and closer, until finally it crashes down on the restaurant deck, blanketing it in a thick avalanche cloud amid screams of terror. When the snow dust settles after a few minutes and visibility is restored, it becomes apparent that no real harm was done. Quickly recovering from the big scare, the flustered tourists simply brush off the snow and resume lunch.

All seems normal until it becomes obvious that Tomas is nowhere to be found. In that frantic moment, when the lives of his wife and kids could have been threatened, Tomas instinctively grabbed his iPhone and gloves and fled. When Tomas' self-preserving exit is laid bare, it is clear that the real avalanche, that which flies in the face of the security of his most vital relationships, has just begun.

Force majeure is a legal term denoting an unforeseen, disruptive event that obstructs the fulfillment of a contract. In the film, it is a synonym for avalanche; the contract in question, marriage and family. To be sure, "Force Majeure" is no disaster popcorn flick.

When Tomas reappears and takes his place back at the table, his family, shaken and fearful, is silent. It is a deafening judgment of his gutlessness. The avalanche has destroyed the veneer of contentment in what was initially established as an ideal, well-to-do family, out vacationing.

Up to this point, the camera frequently captures them acting in concert. In an early scene, they are in matching blue pajamas, snugly nestled together and sleeping soundly in one king-size bed. In another, they are brushing their teeth together, staring at their own reflections in a bathroom mirror.

But the cracks that belie the ad campaign image of familial bliss become subtly apparent in unguarded moments.

When they arrive at the resort, the in-house photographer has them do poses to simulate a postcard perfect family vacation pic; the resulting photographic images show none of the contrived awkwardness they felt in the actual photo session. Ebba also throws a sarcastic dart at Tomas' workaholic habits when she mentions to an acquaintance, "Tomas has been working too much, so now has five days to focus on his family." This would find symbolic validation in the continuing trope of the ringing iPhone, which



The avalanche approaches in "Force Majeure."

—Photos by Magnolia Pictures

constantly stalks Tomas.

It is Tomas' silence that is most deafening. He is too muscular to acknowledge failure, let alone apologize for it. So the rumblings of a different sort of avalanche begins.

In a masterful calibration, filmmaker Ruben Östlund constructs a gathering tempest of emotions where Ebba incrementally lets out her suppressed contempt. While having dinner with another couple at a restaurant, she mentions her family being unnerved by the freak event earlier that day.

Immediately, Tomas is defensive, emphasizing that they're all fine. Ebba retorts, "You ran away." A repartee ensues between the two as to whose version of the story is true; the tension, buffered as it is by the social setting, is uncomfortably real but still contained.

When they later decide to host dinner for yet another couple, this time, in the more intimate setting of the dining room of their resort suite, Ebba puts Tomas on trial. She retells the avalanche story in its shame-filled rawness, detailing that Tomas grabbed his gloves and iPhone, "running like hell away from us."

In the labored argument, the guest couple could not help but take sides based on their respective genders; the woman offers her sympathy to Ebba while the man becomes an apologist for Tomas, whom he sees as having acted on survival mode.

The unresolved issue escalates into a string of full-blown arguments between Tomas and Ebba, which takes its toll on the kids.

The dramatic arc reaches an emotional crescendo when the avalanche of truth finally overtakes Tomas' denial. In the film's most rending scene, he begins to sob uncontrollably. Ebba does not know what to make of it; she appears half-confused, half-embarrassed.

Seeing the pathetic sight of their father sobbing face-down on the floor triggers an instant response of forgiveness from the kids, each running to embrace him. Noticing that her mother has not done the same, the little girl pulls her in to join them.

They form a mountain of support over Tomas, as though symbolically issuing a healing response to the avalanche. It is worth mentioning,



Lisa Loven Kongsli and Johannes Bah Kuhnke in "Force Majeure"

though, that as touching as this scene may be, Östlund doesn't make it easy. Supposedly a drama cum dark comedy — to be sure, more of the former — Tomas' overwrought hysterical sobbing is slightly comical. You wonder if these are tears of true remorse or of the crocodile variety.

"Force Majeure" offers plenty of conversation points on marriage and family. For me as a Catholic, it certainly fuels my anticipation for the upcoming Synod of Bishops on the family. But widening the aperture, it also

makes me reflect on the inarguable truth that none of us is exempted from the contradictions wrought by our human finitude and imperfection. It took the apostle Peter the ultimate force majeure to realize it on strike three. We should take the hint.

[Precious Blood Br. Antonio D. Sison is author of *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human* (2012), and is a faculty member at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. "Force Majeure" is available on DVD and Blu-Ray from Magnolia Pictures.]

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Filippo Pucillo stars as Filippo in "Terraferma."

'Terraferma' struggles with the law of the sea

By ANTONIO D. SISON

It is not without irony that a film titled "Terraferma," the Italian term for "dry land," would open with an underwater shot. We see the underside of a fishing boat trawling a net through the azure waters of the Mediterranean Sea. It is a good catch, and the chipper 19-year-old Filippo (Filippo Pucillo) does a happy dance at the stern before his amused grandfather Ernesto (Mimmo Cuticchio), a veteran fisherman.

But as they head back home to Lampedusa, a picturesque speck of an island in the southernmost part of Italy, they run into the debris of a capsized boat, causing serious damage to the propeller of their fishing boat.

Life in Lampedusa is both idyllic and harsh. Filippo lost his father to the sea three years ago. His widowed mother, Giulietta (Donatella Finocchiaro), is bent on selling their house to start life anew on the mainland; in the meantime, she decides to move their living quarters to the garage and rent out the main house to tourists.

His uncle Nino (Beppe Fiorello), a self-styled tour organizer, is pushing Ernesto to sell the decaying fishing boat, a prospect the old fisherman spurns. Filippo struggles to make sense of the discomposure on top of his fair share of teenage angst.

In its first half-hour, Emanuele Crialesi's "Terraferma" brings to mind a number of small-scale Italian films that draw attention to the day-to-day concerns of gritty but charming townsfolk, among them, his own "Respiro" (2002), which is also set in Lampedusa. One-third through the film, however, an unanticipated twist sends "Terraferma" on another course, turning it into a compelling human drama with social questions far bigger than what life in the quaint fishing community normally throws at its residents.

While setting sail to fish, Filippo and Ernesto encounter a boat crammed

Mimmo Cuticchio as Ernesto



Sara, played by Timnit T., and Rubel Tsegay Abraha as Omar

with African refugees. The old fisherman immediately radios the coast guard and receives orders to keep distance, but some of the refugees had already jumped into the water in a desperate dash for the fishing boat. Without a thought, Ernesto rescues them.

Of the five refugees taken aboard, the three men run off and disappear; the other two, a young boy and a preg-

fends off the refugees with a pole and sails away posthaste.

The following morning, the beach is strewn with half-drowned refugees, prompting a compassionate response from the startled tourists who immediately attend to them. Shamed, Filippo could only bolt away.

While "Terraferma" pays attention to the complex sociopolitical realities swirling around the refugee question, the heart of the film is the intimate human drama between Giulietta and Sara (Timnit T.), the African refugee who gives birth in the garage home. Giulietta is in a Catch-22 pendulum, torn between her solidarity with a woman who, like her, is a burdened mother, and her fear of breaking the law and compromising the fragile stability of her own family. She instinctively offers assistance to her uninvited guest and her children, but issues stern warnings that they will have to leave soon.

Despite Sara's failed attempts to connect with her unwilling host, the bond between them as mothers is perceptible. The camera often frames the two women in a face-to-face position and the poetics of their gaze belie the wall that alienates them.

Gradually, Giulietta's hard veneer begins to thaw as she listens to the refugee's story. She learns that en route to Lampedusa, Sara was thrown into prison in Libya, where she was raped and impregnated by a police officer. The child she decided to keep is the very one she had given birth to.

At a later turn, when the mothers stand before each other for the last time, the refugee quietly sheds tears and utters, "I am sorry, Giulietta. I am sorry, Giulietta." Moved with compassion, Giulietta responds with an earnest embrace.

Meaningfully, the image of the Virgin Mary appears at key turns in the film. In the opening sequence, we see a small statue positioned on the dashboard of Ernesto's boat; and again, moments before they encounter the boatload of refugees. On the third instance, the camera pans on an undersea grotto of a life-size, seaweed-draped statue of the Virgin Mary, just following the scene when refugees are washed ashore.

Consonant with the mother motif between Giulietta and Sara, it is reasonable to interpret this as a symbolic appeal for motherly compassion. Mary of Nazareth, after all, is the proto-refugee; she knows about the ordeal of having to flee for sanctuary while heavy with child, only to find that there is no room in the inn.

In April, the world was shocked by headlines reporting that hundreds of refugees had drowned along the coast of Lampedusa. Closer to Africa than it is to the Italian mainland, the island is, by default, the site of first rescue. For its small community, the pendulum between the law of the sea and the law of the land continues.

The film does not propose a definitive solution to the crisis, it simply cannot. But one carry-out value from my viewing is this: Behind every refugee story is a human story.

The irony is not lost; "Terraferma," dry land, has everything to do with the sea.

nant woman, find shelter in Giulietta's garage home.

When authorities interrogate Ernesto about the incident, they hold him liable for "aiding and abetting illegal immigration" and confiscate his boat.

Filled with consternation, the old fisherman retorts, "Do you know the law of the sea?"

The law of the sea provides that persons who are in distress at sea must be immediately rescued; legal questions are to be sorted out after. The moral imperative is held sacrosanct by international maritime law and custom, but tensions come to a boil when the law of the sea clashes with the law of the land.

In a heated community meeting, the older generation of fishermen led by Ernesto argues for the "rescue first" option, while members of the younger generation, who depend on tourism for income, find a mouthpiece in Nino, who argues against it.

The moral riptide is further dramatized when Filippo, poised for a romantic evening at sea with a pretty tourist, runs into a bevy of refugees, flailing in the water in a mad scramble to board his small boat. Panic-stricken, Filippo

[Precious Blood Br. Antonio D. Sison is author of *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human* (2012), and is a faculty member at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. "Terraferma" is available on DVD and Blu-ray from Cohen Media Group.]