

**JULY RHAPSODY
(LAAM YAN SEI SAP)**

Dir Ann Hui

Hong Kong, 2002, 103 mins



As I mention in my article on *Visible Secrets* as part of the current edition of Film International this film really marks the very start of the season that is now taking place. I was in Hong Kong, just a few months before I started work at Cornerhouse, and decided to watch some films in a fleapit cinema in Causeway Bay. One of those was *July Rhapsody* and I was really taken back by how such a sensitive, understated film could be made in Hong Kong – a city and film industry obsessed with commercialism and passing trends. Of course there are a few other filmmakers that have managed the balance – Wong Kar-wai and Fruit Chan in particular. Yet none have had the long and varied career of Ann Hui and they at least have seen one or two films distributed in the UK. So after that screening I made a note to come back to Ann Hui and correct this, and also explore other women directors. Also it perhaps says more about UK distribution than Ann Hui's film that *July Rhapsody* is available around the world for example on Amazon.com in the US.

Director Ann Hui attended the London Film School before embarking on a career in television, something perhaps that prepared her for exploring domestic narratives – indeed *July Rhapsody* might well be a TV drama or soap plot – however its cast and crew elevate it far beyond this status. She started making features in 1979 and her career has since high and low points seen then, particularly raising in awards and recognition post-millennium.

Whilst Ann has made many genre movies for example her film before this is a ghost story (*Visible Secret*, 2001) and the subsequent one is a police drama (*Goddess of Mercy*, 2003). This film fits into a clear strand of her work that looks at everyday stories, usually centred on a family with a slice of documentary realism (such as her recent *The Way We Are*, 2008). Previous films such as the semi-autobiographical *Song of the Exile* (1989) have centred on women but Ann is keen to avoid being known as either a filmmaker for women or indeed as she told us herself about this season – a women filmmaker. As if to prove this point *July Rhapsody* presents a male lead who adopts our sympathies and the motives of the female protagonists are often unclear. There are no moments of high melodrama or revelation; the beauty of the film is in the detail and the delicate balance of emotions for Mr Lam. An alternative title, *Man of 40*, also provides the link to this film's unofficial companion piece *Summer Snow* (1995, also known as *Woman of 40*) also about a family's domestic problems.

A lot of credit must go to the screenwriter Ivy Ho, an acclaimed script veteran who has worked with Hong Kong heavyweights Jackie Chan, Johnnie To and Peter Chan. This work is more closely related to that of the last director, Peter Chan, and their critically acclaimed *Comrades*:

Almost a Love Story starring Maggie Cheung and Leon Lai also focusing on a compromised relationship. Inappropriate and unfulfilled affairs also continue in Ivy's directorial debut *Claustrophobia* (2009), this time an older (though maybe not wiser!) Karena Lam falls for a married work colleague.

The real strength of this film for me lies in the casting, in particular the lead trio of Jacky Cheung, Anita Mui and Karena Lam. At the time of the release Hong Kong audiences would have been well aware of two of their favourite cantopop stars Anita and Jacky, nicknamed 'Madonna of the East' and 'God of Songs' respectively. Jacky Cheung is one of the Cantopop Four Heavenly Kings (Aaron Kwok, Andy Lau and Leon Lai being the others) and is particularly known for his younger brother triad roles in films such as *As Tears Go By* (1988) and *Bullet in the Head* (1990). In *July Rhapsody* he breaks a five-year hiatus from films to play against type, demonstrating his credentials as a serious actor with a nuanced, restrained performance.

Anita Mui famously sold out the Hammersmith Apollo London with one of her legendary, energetic concerts. Sadly, she is now mostly remembered as dying aged only 40 of cervical cancer. Anita broke through on an 'X-Factor' type show in 1982, actually released a mind-boggling 50 albums during her 20-year career, much of was broadcast by tabloids whether true or not. She actually opened the Seoul Olympics with Janet Jackson, much less controversially than Janet's last sports concert! Anita even refused to accept awards after 1990 for music, as she wanted to give newcomers a chance. She also starred in over 40 films and her classic roles include the tormented ghost lover in *Rouge* (1985), action chick in *The Heroic Trio* (1993) and with Jackie Chan in *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995).

This is Karena Lam's first film role garnering her much critical attention and launching a successful career to date. Around the same time she appeared in *Inner Senses* (2002) with Leslie Cheung, raising her profile even further. She also started as a singer but it is as an actress that she is really known. She appears in several Visible Secrets films – more than any other actress – a tribute to her risk-taking and adventurous approach to her film choices.

And finally, *July Rhapsody* has won many awards including 3 at the Hong Kong film awards and 3 at the Golden Horse film festival in Taiwan. Karena Lam alone won 5 awards for her performance and also Ivy Ho won 2 awards for her screenplay. The film also made LoveHKFilm reviewer admit, "despite the narrative and stylistic skills of Johnnie To and Fruit Chan, Ann Hui may actually be Hong Kong's best storyteller." (Kozo 2000, www.lovehkfilm.com)

The retrospective of Ann Hui's film continues with *Visible Secret* on Mon 19 Oct and the European premiere of *Night and Fog* (2008) on Fri 23 Oct. Karena Lam also stars in *Anna & Anna* on Mon 26 Oct. Ivy Ho will be premiering her new film *Claustrophobia* as part of *Visible Secrets* UK Tour in London on Mon 2 Nov (Curzon Mayfair) and at Cornerhouse on Tue 3 Nov.

Film note written by *Visible Secrets* season co-curator Sarah Perks, Programme & Engagement Director at Cornerhouse.