Flying arts

by Matthew Prins in the February 21, 2001 issue

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000), directed by Ang Lee
Yi Yi (2000), directed by Edward Yang

It contains little more than some fanciful martial arts sequences that are more akin to dancing than fighting. But those sequences! The first fight scene in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* shows a woman chasing a thief across some rooftops. The characters run up the side of houses and make magical leaps from roof to roof. At the end, I was ready to applaud the amazing work of the actors and director Ang Lee, and the men and women who worked the wires. The other fight sequences are similarly fantastic. The finale features characters who, amazingly, are fighting on treetops.

Does that mean one can overlook the sometimes strange but often boring parts in between the fights? I couldn't. There is some talk about an important sword, but that topic is soon dropped. There's reference to a character's impending marriage, which leads to a 30-minute flashback that barely relates to anything else we've seen. None of this is engaging. *Crouching Tiger* is based on the fourth part of a five-part novel, which may explain the underdeveloped drama.

Even the actors seem to understand that what they're doing when not flying, dancing or fighting is rather useless. Chow Yun Fat, who appeared in *Anna and the King*, often seems stiff when he's speaking (and hence not fighting); strangely, he never seems all that depressed over the loss of his wonderful sword. Zhang Ziyi, playing a woman who must decide between good and evil, gets by on her instant charisma and her fantastic gymnastic ability. Michelle Yeoh is the only one of the leads to impress. She is maternal and romantic and shows authentic emotion.

No scene in *Yi Yi* (*A One and a Two*) has the visceral impact of *Crouching Tiger*, but director Edward Yang's goal is different: to present the arc of life from several discrete viewpoints at once. He does it perfectly. Nothing happens that doesn't happen every day. It's so deceptively simple and so true to life that when a theme starts to emerge, it comes as a shock: we didn't know real life had a theme.

The movie is hung on the effort to see what you can't see. The young son photographs the back of people's heads. His father starts talking to the girlfriend he left decades ago to see what could have been. The father's wife leaves the house to find God and doesn't return until the credits are about to run.

Yang echoes the theme in his shots: some are nowhere near the action, some are filmed through windows and show both an interior and an exterior. Not since *Lone Star*'s focus on history in 1996 has every aspect of a film been so unselfconsciously wound around its theme. Elaine Jin, Issey Ogata, Kelly Lee and the young Jonathan Chang--all completely unknown to American audiences--manage to create characters whose lives extend beyond the film. Nien-Jen Wu is astounding as the father: he quietly portrays a forlorn character with a trace of optimism and an integrity that is never misplaced. Not only does the father not sleep with his ex-girlfriend, but he gets a separate hotel room to stave off temptation. Yang takes a situation with an easy emotional payoff--climaxing with a will-he-or-won't-he scene--and turns it into something stirring. Like *Crouching Tiger*, this could be the fourth part of a five-part novel, but Yang uses the film's epic scope to advantage. It was the best film of 2000.