

Immigrant Matters

Meryl Streep's brilliance here may go unnoticed, but she's making the smartest choices of her career—including the decision to star in 'Dark Matter'

By Armond White

LONG AFTER MERYL Streep's highly praised, highly artificial performances in the 1980s (and her by-default Oscar-nominated parts in the 1990s), she has recently entered her most interesting phase as an actress. Streep was the best thing in the fraudulent *The Hours*, unexpectedly funny and credible in *Adaptation*, dauntingly fierce in *The Manchurian Candidate*, authentically officious in *Rendition*, dazzling and heartfelt in *A Prairie Home Companion*. Her two most unusual roles are a sell-out journalist in *Lions for Lambs* and now as a dissembling patroness in *Dark Matter*.

Streep's character—wealthy, cultured Joanna Silver—endows the West Coast American university where Liu Xing (Liu Ye), a lonesome yet hopeful graduate student from Beijing, comes to earn an advanced degree in astrophysics. Liu Xing experiences immigrant culture shock, ironically matching Joanna's native insecurity. It is just such an ingenious pairing that makes *Dark Matter*, an un-hyped, small-scale movie directed by Chen Shi-Zeng, the best case for understanding Streep's latest achievements. This isn't success in terms of media approval, like the fawning press George Clooney routinely receives, but quite the opposite: Streep's current brilliance goes unrecognized. She's choosing roles that resist the pressure to be politically fashionable and dares to challenge the media's political presumptions. Her artistry has become genuinely exploratory, going against the easy self-congratulatory sentiments that are Clooney's (and the mainstream media's) stock-in-trade.

America's tragedies, the bitterness and anger cited in Barack Obama's recent speech on race, can, in *Dark Matter*, be traced to their roots in people's various disappointments and weaknesses. *Dark Matter* dramatizes the 1991 incident where immigrant student Gang Lu killed five people at the University of Iowa, without sensationalizing it. Looking deeper allows Streep to show Joanna's unintentional condescension and the small-minded envy of Liu Xing's university mentor, Reiser, an aerospace expert played by Aidan Quinn. Skip that unlikely casting. Chen's neat trick is having Quinn play the prof's bonhomie, not his deep-seated jealousy. *Dark Matter* indeed. In snarky hands, Streep and



Meryl Streep plays wealthy, cultured Joanna Silver in *Dark Matter*, about a Chinese graduate student who is obsessed with studying an invisible, theoretical substance.

Quinn would be wildly villainous (modern-day relatives of Daniel Day-Lewis in *There Will Be Blood* or one of *Michael Clayton*'s bureaucratic crazies). It's credit to both Streep and Quinn's integrity that *Dark Matter* uncovers the natural instincts and social foibles that underpin racism.

When Reiser begrudgingly prevents Liu Xing (whom he first welcomed as "brilliant") from receiving his doctoral degree for an original thesis about "dark matter" in outer space, it reveals one of those ignored instances of institutional bias that inevitably become part of the unspoken history of American rancor and division. Describing his theory, Liu Xing states, "No one pays attention to it because they can't see it. I can use mathematics to see it." And that's what Chen and co-writer Billy Shebar have done; their cinematic math appropriately employs the actors' humanity to illuminate the causalness of racial, cultural, institutional and personal injustice.

Refusing to demonize, *Dark Matter* bases its tragic story on human likelihood. Liu Xing's instability is apparent in the good-face he puts on in letters to his working-class parents back home. Joanna's solicitude toward the transfer students (she's devoted to Asian arts) covers up her fractured home life. Reiser is the treacher-

ously ambitious good guy (he's dangerously devoted to maintaining his professional reputation). Chen shows Liu Xing's quiet panic: At his lowest point, roused from bed by a dormmate who insistently cuts his hair, Liu Xing is so miserable that he's oblivious to the brotherly, caring gesture. It's the damndest, heartbreakingest thing since Ira Sachs' view of outsider's despair in *The Delta*.

Dark Matter conveys the oddity of alienation through an Americana song score ("Beautiful Dreamer," "Old Black Joe," "Red River Valley," "Shenandoah," "Long, Long Ago"). All sung in Chinese, these are sentiments Liu Xing admires yet they are, in fact, withheld from him. Like Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* score, this classic/traditional soundtrack touches a deep, familiar fount of sorrow. However, the inclusion of a metaphoric *Madame Butterfly* performance (at a faculty/grad student barbecue) might be too archly blatant. Chen doesn't trust that we appreciate the characters' sense of futility—the political helplessness that Streep remarkably avoids exploiting.

Out of left field, *Dark Matter* refrains from guilt-mongering—the national self-contempt that infected Gus Van Sant's also tragedy-based *Elephant*. Here, Americans' contemporary depression is realized in an amazing face-to-heart between Liu Xing

and Joanna at a moment of desperate, helpless coincidence. Liu Xing is not a narrative abstraction like the Chinese immigrant film student in Hou Hsiao Hsien's *Flight of the Red Balloon*; he expresses the distance and longing that aliens feel because *Dark Matter* is more political and morally grounded. Lucky moviegoers might poignantly remember Liu Ye from Chen Kaige's *The Promise*; here, he reaches out to Streep—who daringly wears the blond curls from *Sophie's Choice*—evoking an established tale of immigrant sadness. (It also recalls *The Corn is Green* story, only the crop has rotted.) Together, those sympathetic characterizations are even more moving.

Streep rouses Joanna's sense of citizenship and femininity. This is characterization, not her over-calculated, superficial shtick in *The Devil Wears Prada* (that horribly false celebration of professional backstabbing). Joanna's marital calamity collides with her ineffectual politics. It's conceptually brilliant—probably the key reason Streep took on this offbeat project. Yet, if *Dark Matter* doesn't rise to greatness, Joanna's empathy is devastating enough; it takes us inside Liu Xing's anomie. What follows is inevitable calamity—a predictable *There Will Be Blood* finale. But *Dark Matter* isn't fashionably nihilistic. It has already struck home with Streep and Liu Ye's heart to heart.

Dark Matter

Directed by
Chen Shi-Zeng