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HAPPYTIMES (MOTION PICTURE)

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SONY PICTURES CLASSICS/Color/1.85/Dolby SR/ 106 Mins./Rated PG

Cast: Zhao Benshan, Dong Jie, Dong Lihua, Fu Biao, Li Zuejian, Leng Qibin, Niu Ben, Gong Jinghua, **Zhang** Hongjie, Zhao Bingkun.

Credits: Directed by **Zhang Yimou**. Produced by Zhao Yu, Yang Qinglong, Zhou Ping, **Zhang** Weiping. Screenplay by Gui Zi, based on the novella Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh by Mo Yan. Executive producers: Edward R. Pressman, Terrence Malick, Wang Wei. Director of photography: Hou Yong. Production designer: Cao Jiuping. Edited by Zhai Ru. Costume designer: Tong Huarniao. A Guangxi Film Studios, Zhu Hai Guo Gi Enterprise Development Co. and Beijing New Picture Distribution Co. production. In Mandarin with English subtitles.

China's **Zhang Yimou** fashions yet another allegorical masterpiece with this story of an aging pensioner and a young blind woman.

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In this ostensibly simple story about an elderly bachelor and a blind girl, director **Zhang Yimou** creates yet another masterpiece of allegory, as he did in *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) and *The Road Home* (2000). **Happy Times** is filmed from the point of view of the bachelor, Zhao (Zhao Benshan), but its undeniable hero is Wu Ying (Dong Jie), a slip of a girl whose boundless spirit--like the mother's in *The Road Home* and like Qiu Ju's--is, for the Chinese filmmaker, emblematic of his homeland. Watching **Happy Times**, it's easy to understand why **Zhang** often attracts the ire of Chinese authorities: His characters, like Zhao, confront spiritual crises, crises that stem, ineluctably, from the failure of the Cultural Revolution. His heroes are rebels, like Wu Ying, for whom such crises are a kind of stigmata.

Subtle and even humorous at the outset, **Happy Times** soon plunges into the issues of loneliness and abandonment which bring Zhao, a pensioner, and Wu Ying, an abused stepdaughter, together. Zhao hopes to make Wu Ying's stepmother his wife, unaware at first of the elder woman's darker side. First, he must earn enough money for the wedding, having led the woman to believe that he's wealthy. Zhao asks his former student Li (Li Xuejian) for a loan, but Li comes up with an idea

instead: He and Zhao will refurbish an abandoned bus parked in the city's lover's lane. Zhao will rent time on the bus--dubbed "**Happy Times**"--to the couples for a fee. However, Zhao's old-fashioned values prevent him from carrying out the plan, dashing his hopes of earning enough money to pay for the wedding.

In the course of his brief courtship, Zhao learns that Wu Ying's father, a gambler, abandoned her to the stepmother in lieu of his debts, promising his daughter he would return with enough money for an operation to restore her sight. The evil stepmother extracts a promise from Zhao that he will give Wu Ying a job in the **Happy Times** Hotel, which he's led her to believe is a luxurious place. Zhao has no choice but to bring the blind girl to the bus. What follows are his misguided efforts to rescue Wu Ying while still holding her stepmother to her promise to marry him.

Along with Li, Zhao's co-conspirators are poor pensioners like him, struggling to survive in the big city. Together, they devise a way to help Wu Ying after the bus is hauled away and she refuses to return home. In an old warehouse outside the city, they fabricate a place for her to work--she's a gifted masseuse--telling her it's a room in another of Zhao's hotels. The bachelor gives up his own apartment so Wu Ying will have a place to sleep. It's a temporary solution--the warehouse is soon to be demolished.

Like Ford's Dust Bowl migrants, **Zhang's** characters have no place in the world. Wu Ying, Zhao and his friends, suffering from neglect and outright abandonment, are the victims of failed patriarchy, China's failed patriarchy. In contrast to the director's other films where the triumph of individuality is so evident, **Happy Times** seems less assured. Wu Ying is bent on a reunion with her father, but it's literally a blind search for paternity. In her real and symbolic quest, and in Zhao's attempts to compensate for her loss of a father, **Zhang** makes a powerful statement about modern-day China. The underpinning of paternalistic values which once protected the old and ensured a future for the young is now a pretense, and China is a house of cards about to collapse under the weight of it.

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By Maria Garcia

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