



The Rocket

Director: Kim Mordaunt
Country: Laos/Australia
Date: 2013



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A review by Manohla Dargis for the *New York Times*:

A pretty, somewhat sleepy and finally strange once-upon-a-time tale, “The Rocket” is the story of a Laotian boy who transcends adversity, partly because, if we’re being honest, few moviegoers would probably want to watch a film about a boy who doesn’t (unless it is a documentary). It opens with a villager, Mali (Alice Keohavong), giving birth to twins, one dead. An older relative, Taitok (Bunsri Yindi), wants to kill the surviving child because, she insists, twins are bad luck. Mali successfully begs for the boy’s life, and, after the dead newborn is clandestinely buried, the surviving child grows up to become the movie’s plucky 10-year-old hero, Ahlo (Siththiphon Disamoe).



The story is simple, blunt and vague. One day, a man in a military uniform passes out leaflets to local residents, who are summoned to a presentation at which it’s announced that they will be relocated to make way for a dam. Suddenly, everyone is on the move, Ahlo’s family included, hauling their meager worldly goods across the lush countryside, vividly shot by Andrew Commis. A terrible accident thins the family’s numbers, a calamity that the insufferable, wretched Taitok pins on Ahlo. Even Ahlo’s father, Toma (Sumrit Warin), who clenches his fists at the boy, seems to fault him. Soon, though, there are other problems to contend with, including the pitiful makeshift camp to which the family is relocated with scores of other bewildered villagers.

Aside from a Socialist realist-style billboard and some oblique remarks, “The Rocket” avoids political complexities and specifics to concentrate on Ahlo and his everyday travails and adventures, including his new, romantically tinged friendship with a winsome, sad-eyed girl, Kia (Lounnam Kaosainam). She lives with her uncle, nicknamed Purple (Thep Phongam), an eccentric who, in homage to the singer James Brown, wears a deep purple suit and arranges his hair in a slick poof. Purple turns out to have a more interesting, far tougher and harsher history than his kitschy kookiness suggests, but — as is always the case with this movie — anything too ugly, depressing and politically pointed is soon muffled by adorable shenanigans and beauty shots of the landscape.

This is the most recent movie from the Australian director Kim Mordaunt, whose last was the documentary “Bomb Harvest,” about an Australian explosives disposal specialist and Laotian children who gather bomb scrap metal. The prevalence of unexploded bombs is a running motif in “The Rocket” and, in one of the sharpest, most effective scenes, a surreal interlude in an abandoned mountainside village, large missiles can be seen propping up homes.

What gives this movie its sting is that, despite Mr. Mordaunt’s insistent attempts at uplift, death hovers over this story at every single moment, from the truck filled with bombs on which the family hitches a ride to the eye-poppingly dangerous rocket contest that gives the movie its title. Here, every smile feels etched in sorrow.

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