



clean

2004 110m *prod* Rhombus Media, Rectangle Productions (France), Haystack Productions (U.K.), *p* Niv Fichman, Edouard Weil, Xavier Marchand, *d/sc* Olivier Assayas, *pb* Eric Gautier, *ed* Luc Barnier, *pd* François-Renaud Labarthe, Bill Fleming, *s* Guillaume Sciamma, Herwig Gayer, Richard Flynn, *mus* David Roback, Brian Eno; *with* Maggie Cheung, Nick Nolte, Béatrice Dalle, Jeanne Balibar, Don McKellar, James Dennis, Martha Henry, James Johnston.

Emily Wang and Lee Hauser are a true rock 'n' roll couple. Lee, the struggling rock star, has enjoyed his period of popularity, but that time is well past and now he is relegated to playing dingy clubs while he tries to get his career back on track. In tow, as always, is his wife, Emily, who, like Yoko Ono, is blamed for the changes in her husband's declining career. True, she is abrasive and she spends more time looking for drugs than she does looking for a recording contract, but after a stop in Hamilton, Ontario ends with the tragic death of Lee from an overdose and Emily in jail for heroin possession, cracks begin to appear in her tough rock-chick persona.

When she gets out, she has nothing. No money, friends or family, except for a son she hasn't seen in years who lives with her in-laws in Vancouver. Lee's mother, Rosemary, blames Emily for the death of Lee, and would rather that her daughter-in-law stay away from them and their grandson. On the other hand, her husband, Albrecht, believes Emily when she says she wants to straighten out and take responsibility for her son, Jay. But Albrecht's not a fool; he knows her transformation is not going to be easy.

Hoping that old relationships will bring her luck in pulling her life back together, Emily flees to France. It doesn't take long, however, for her to realize that things are not what they used to be. Everything falls apart all over again. In the

meantime, life is starting to crumble for Albrecht, who travels to England to bring his sick wife to see a specialist. As he realizes that she's dying and that he's quickly becoming an old man, unable to take care of the child on his own, he decides it's time for Jay to meet his mother.

Now Emily has choices to make. She has an opportunity to record an album in San Francisco, but she's afraid that doing this would ruin her chances with her son. After meeting him, and without telling Albrecht, she decides to go to San Francisco and take Jay with her. Albrecht catches on and tries to talk some sense into Emily, suggesting that she go and make her album in the United States while he and Jay attend to Rosemary during her last days. When Emily's finished recording, she can come back and assume her role as mother, comforting her son while he grieves for his grandmother.

Maggie Cheung

The first thing that is striking about *Clean* is its juxtaposition between ugliness and beauty. The French director of this Canada/France/U.K. co-production, Olivier Assayas (*Irma Vep*, *Demonlover*), has the ability to find beauty in the ugliest places. Starting with the first shot of the film: a silent fade into the industrial landscape of Hamilton, Ontario. In the darkness, the lights from the steel mills sparkle next to the smokestacks with their billowing white clouds. It's breathtaking.

The beginning of the film has Emily (Maggie Cheung) in this dark, dirty city, looking out upon a sea of factories while she shoots up and passes out in the front seat of her car. Heroin has turned her into a selfish and demanding person, and directly lead her to lose two of the best things in her life: her husband and son. In trying to clean up the mess she has made of her life, she recovers some of what she lost and rebuilds a connection with her son while gaining the confidence and support of her gentle and caring father-in-law, Albrecht (Nick Nolte). The end of the film finds her gazing out over the tree-lined water's edge in San Francisco, signifying the rebirth of her life in a much brighter light.

Apart from the gorgeous cinematography supplied by Eric Gautier (*The Motorcycle Diaries*) and a few good characters, the one thing that stands out about *Clean* is that the screenplay is merely ordinary. The film is never entirely boring, but there is something missing that never fixes itself. Part of the problem seems to be that by introducing the main character as someone who is inherently unlikeable (after all, she abandons her son and provides the heroin that kills her husband), instead of achieving sympathy for her plight, it seems to demonstrate that she gets exactly what she deserves. She may not be evil, but there is no reason to feel sorry for her. She has ruined her own life.

The only completely likable and fleshed-out character is Albrecht. Nolte delivers a subdued performance as the kindly grandfather who believes in Emily even though she's given him no reason to in the past. His charm lies in the calm patience he has with his unpredictable daughter-in-law. Not always one for playing the most likable of

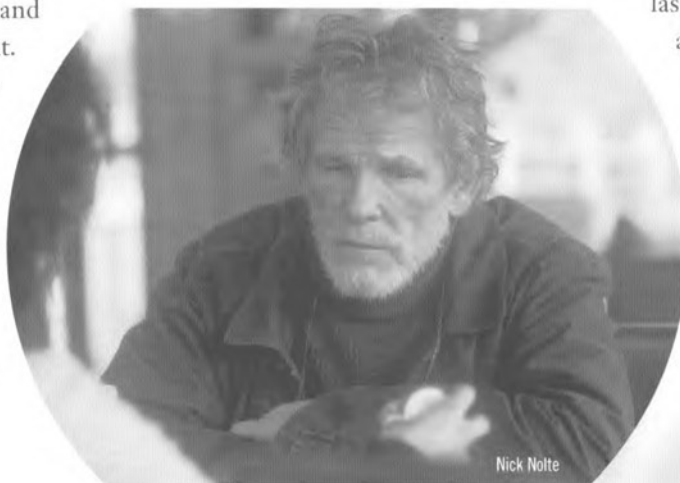


Emily (Maggie Cheung)

characters, Nolte is absolutely lovable in this role. Cheung, on the other hand, has been more impressive in films such as the Chinese epic *Hero* or Kar Wai Wong's hit, *In the Mood for Love*. It is obvious that the part of Emily was written expressly for her, and she handles the dialogue in three languages (English, French and Mandarin), but her impressive linguistic skills are not enough to carry an essentially cliched melodrama, the kind that Joan Crawford used to chew up in another era. Even though she won the Best Actress Award for her performance in *Clean* at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, in this case, Cheung's beautiful on-screen presence is more captivating than her performance. Despite its problems with the script, the look and feel of *Clean* are its biggest strengths.

Ironically, for a film that revolves around musicians, the soundtrack consists mostly of silence. Music is used sparingly and almost never plays over top the dialogue, which is often whispered. The music that is used is soft and unobtrusive, creating an atmosphere that allows for uninterrupted focus on the characters. In the last scene, Emily stands alone in a studio, singing over music that plays faintly in the background. We just hear her voice, rough and fragile, as she sings through her pain.

Lindsay Gibb



Nick Nolte