

■ AT THE MOVIES

Birds of Prey: A girl power film whether it wants to be or not

By Kai Curry
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY

Harley Quinn (née Harleen Quinzel) and the Joker (aka “puddin”) have broken up. Now, she is on her own without the Joker to protect her against the wrath of everyone she ever wronged. She is, apparently, not liked. In “Birds of Prey” (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn), we have a sequel of sorts to Suicide Squad. As the movie starts, Quinn is gorging on spray cheese and tears, and we wonder, will Harley Quinn get her act together? Will she recover from the heartache of breakup and form yet another new identity? Not a psychologist. Not someone (in)famous’s paramour. Just her badass self.

I had no idea what to expect from this film. It seemed it was a “girl power” movie—Harley Quinn and her pals kick butt kind of thing—but I wasn’t sure. I can attest that there were many more males in the theater than females on the day that I attended. I have no idea what that means, but I’m willing to bet they did not get out of the movie what I got out of it.

Director Cathy Yan, the first Asian woman to direct a DC film or a film about any American superhero, has successfully captured that distinctive dark comic feel that we’ve all come to associate with the world of Batman. In press materials

released by the studio, Yan does claim a fondness for that world.

“Growing up, I loved Gotham,” she said. And Yan enjoyed the script written by Christina Hodson, especially the personalities of the female stars.

“They are these badass fighters, plus Harley is over the top, drops F-bombs, and makes terrible decisions. Her imperfections make her both relatable and also just really fun...”

Hodson, who is part Taiwanese, told MTV in a recent interview, “We wanted it to feel organic and not like a girl power movie. It doesn’t need to be a feminist movie because we’re all women writing and making this movie. It’s just naturally there. It’s a movie that I hope men and women will love.”

I don’t know, but I feel a little betrayed by that. You have this great chance and you instantly downplay it? The movie is fun, yes. The movie can appeal to men and women, to anyone that loves the DC universe. I suspect the filmmakers did not want to alienate male viewers, but maybe give men more credit. Plenty of men like strong women. It’s true the “girl power” aspect is not obvious. Quinn, played by Margot Robbie, is often quite delicate. And, if your impression from the previews is that these girls act united, you are misled (as was I). They hardly know each other and



no one likes Quinn. The crux that brings them together is a diamond, I mean, a girl. Nah, really a diamond. But it happens that the diamond was stolen by the young Cain, who swallowed it. Now, everyone is out to get it, and several lives are on the line, including Quinn’s, as one of the people who wants to kill her, just generally, is one of the most powerful men in the city—Roman Sionis, the Black Mask.

Ella Jay Basco, in her film debut as Cain, enjoyed working together with Robbie and in that sense, this is a girl power film.

“Margot was like a big sister to me, we had the best time with each other,” Basco has said in interviews released to the press. “She taught me so much about working with people on- and off-camera. It was amazing.”

Basco, who is of Korean and Filipino descent, does a fantastic job of playing a street-wise kid that still has a heavy dose of childish innocence. She thinks fast, but she’s not beyond crying and is

see *BIRDS* on 13

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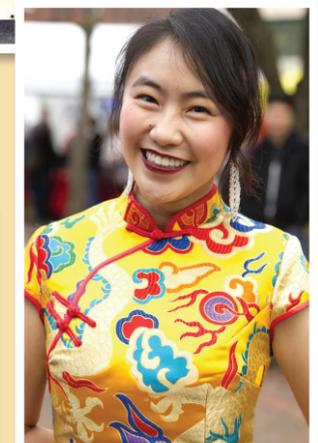
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Our event organizer John Liu and contestants on stage (Photo by George Liu)

■ ASTROLOGY

Predictions and advice for the week of February 15–21, 2020

By Sun Lee Chang



Rat — Are you trying to bridge a gap, but are still far apart? Offer to meet at or near the middle.



Ox — Good choices add up. Even if you occasionally falter, it's the final count that matters.



Tiger — You are used to looking back or ahead, but there is something to be said for just being in the present.



Rabbit — There is a difference between saying just enough to be understood and overexplaining. Keep it short and sweet.



Dragon — Are you in the proverbial eye of the storm? Despite the chaos, it is still better to be in the calm center.



Snake — Take the time to read the fine print. A little extra effort now will minimize surprises down the road.



Horse — The preview seemed less than promising, but give it a chance. It could turn out better than you anticipated.



Goat — Don't assume others hold the same opinion as you. Tread carefully, especially when you are at work.



Monkey — Are you disappointed that not all are on board with your plan? You have enough to get started regardless.



Rooster — You don many hats in your current role. By delegating some, you can focus on the important ones.



Dog — Is the scene not quite playing out as you had hoped? Be patient, for it could still turn out in your favor.



Pig — Let success build upon success. Rather than pulling back, redouble your efforts to push yourself to the next level.

WHAT'S YOUR ANIMAL SIGN?

RAT 1912, 1924, 1936, 1948, 1960, 1972, 1984, 1996, 2008, 2020 **OX** 1913, 1925, 1937, 1949, 1961, 1973, 1985, 1997, 2009 **TIGER** 1914, 1926, 1938, 1950, 1962, 1974, 1986, 1998, 2010 **RABBIT** 1915, 1927, 1939, 1951, 1963, 1975, 1987, 1999, 2011 **DRAGON** 1916, 1928, 1940, 1952, 1964, 1976, 1988, 2000, 2012 **SNAKE** 1917, 1929, 1941, 1953, 1965, 1977, 1989, 2001, 2013 **HORSE** 1918, 1930, 1942, 1954, 1966, 1978, 1990, 2002, 2014 **GOAT** 1919, 1931, 1943, 1955, 1967, 1979, 1991, 2003, 2015 **MONKEY** 1920, 1932, 1944, 1956, 1968, 1980, 1992, 2004, 2016 **ROOSTER** 1921, 1933, 1945, 1957, 1969, 1981, 1993, 2005, 2017 **DOG** 1922, 1934, 1946, 1958, 1970, 1982, 1994, 2006, 2018 **PIG** 1923, 1935, 1947, 1959, 1971, 1983, 1995, 2007, 2019

*The year ends on the first new moon of the following year. For those born in January and February, please take care when determining your sign.

STUDY ABROAD from 5

The virus represents an unprecedented disruption for the academic ties between the U.S. and China, said Brad Farnsworth, vice president of global engagement at the American Council on Education.

He recalled the SARS crisis in 2002 and 2003, when the severe acute respiratory syndrome that originated in China killed nearly 800 people.

“The whole higher education relationship was not nearly as complex as it is now,” Farnsworth said. “We have many, many more students going in both directions.”

Many academic collaborations could be rescheduled if the crisis is resolved quickly, but the longer it lasts, the deeper the damage will be, he added.

China sends far more students to the United States than any other country—more than 369,000 in the last academic year, according to the Institute of International Education. The U.S. typically sends more than 11,000 students to China annually. Lately, the relationship has been strained by visa difficulties, trade conflicts and U.S. concerns about security risks posed by visiting Chinese students.

“This doesn't help the current situation, which is very tense right now,” Farnsworth said. “This is a low point in U.S.-China higher education relations, there's no question.”

China's consul general in New York, Huang Ping, said at a Feb. 4 news conference that students who returned to the U.S. from Hubei province, which includes Wuhan, should report to health officials so they can be monitored. He urged the international community to work together to combat the illness, saying the “virus is the enemy, not the Chinese.”

In Germany, the Berlin Free University and Berlin Institute of Technology each said they would not allow

visits from China or approve trips to China until further notice. Paderborn University said it was reviewing any China travel plans made by students or doctoral candidates.

A spokesman for Silesian University in the Czech Republic said the school postponed exchange programs for 38 Chinese students. Several other schools issued similar cancellations, but Masaryk University in the Czech city of Brno said it was still ready to accept 24 students from China who are expected in two weeks.

Tens of thousands of Chinese students enrolled in Australian universities are stranded in their home country. Monash University has extended its summer break to give students and staff more time to return. Classes had been scheduled to begin on March 2.

Most Chinese students studying in the U.S. were already in place for classes when the virus emerged, but worries about the illness have led many schools to cancel plans to send Americans to China for an upcoming semester.

At the University of Arkansas, where China has been a popular study-abroad destination, especially for business students, about 60 students who had been planning to travel there beginning in May saw their programs canceled.

The university made the decision earlier this month, before students had to make financial commitments, and it has been working to arrange opportunities in other parts of the world for the affected students, said Sarah Malloy, the university's director of study abroad and international exchange.

One Arkansas student, Lancaster Richmond, had been planning to visit Beijing and Shanghai to fulfill a requirement of her MBA program. Now the 24-year-old is planning to visit Chile this summer instead.

“I was obviously disappointed, but I also understand the university is doing whatever they can in our best

interest,” she said. “It made my parents a little more comfortable as well. They'd obviously been following the news.”

Worries about the virus have altered some rhythms of campus life, including cancellations of Chinese New Year events at the University of Akron and the University of Arizona. But many universities say they are emphasizing precautions such as frequent hand-washing.

Andrew Thomas, chief clinical officer at Ohio State's Wexner Medical Center, said the university is monitoring the situation but trying not to be “over the top to the point that we're causing more concern and fear than is warranted in the community.”

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which enrolls over 5,500 students from China, said some of its students from Wuhan who traveled home during winter break opted to self-quarantine or wear masks while going to class to protect others. Several institutions urged anybody returning from China to isolate themselves for two weeks as a precaution.

At Northeastern University, graduate student Lele Luan said that while some fellow Chinese students have taken to wearing masks around campus in Boston, he does not feel the need.

“They told me it's very safe here,” he said. “So I don't do anything special to protect myself.”

At the University of California, Berkeley, the Tang Center for health services tried to share tips on managing anxiety about the virus. But it faced backlash for a list suggesting that “normal reactions” might include xenophobia and “fears about interacting with those who might be from Asia.”

Asian Americans quickly expressed outrage on social media. The center apologized for “any misunderstanding it may have caused” and changed the wording. ■

BIRDS from 8

still looking for someone to rely on. This achievement can be said of nearly all of the main characters in the film. They are well-rounded. Yan, who was born in China, and who crashed the movie scene at Sundance in 2018, has done a superb job of giving us multidimensional men and women squeezed into a fast-paced, glitter-filled (sometimes literally) romp, full of Route 66 grunge and glam and pulsating music.

I enjoyed the pace and Quinn's quirky personality, though I was shocked, a bit, that the heroine is “an asshole.” Instinctively offended that she is seen by others as “crazy” and “a bitch”—and yes, she takes on this persona herself, while still giving everyone she meets a psychological

diagnosis. I watch as Dinah Lance, or the Black Canary, sings “This is a man's world,” and Renee Montoya's policewoman has credit for her achievements taken from her by her male colleagues. They are all “fenced in.” Caged. Like the canary in the cage that suddenly seems ubiquitous as the film roller coasters towards its climax at a fun park (where else?).

They are birds. Then it hits me. When Sionis' right hand man, Zsasz, kneels next to a tranquilized Harley Quinn and purrs, “Are you a good girl now?”—This is a girl power film. The girls don't know they are in it. Many people don't know they are watching it. Those who put the film together don't seem to want to admit they prioritized women's rights. Women's rights to be themselves, to fight and fight back. No matter what its own creators say, I don't

accept that this is just a “girl gang” movie. When our “band of heroines” does come together, and takes the fight to the throngs of men (and it is all men) led by Sionis, every punch and kick seems to be revenge against every man that ever put them in a cage, told them how to act or how to look, controlled them, hurt them, or convinced them they couldn't stand on their own. Right before the big battle, our pseudo-psychologist Quinn tells the Huntress that “vengeance rarely brings the catharsis we hope for,” and I agree, but dang, it sure feels good, for a little while, to be a bird of prey. ■

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