



Ilo Ilo
Director: Anthony Chen
Country: Singapore
Date: 2014



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A review by Mark Jenkins for The Washington Post.

Singapore is not a land of wide open spaces, as director Anthony Chen shows in “*Ilo Ilo*” by snaking a hand-held camera through tight spots. The crowded compositions convey a sense of life in the dense Asian city-state, but also the intimacy of this semi-autobiographical story. Winner of the best debut film award at last year’s Cannes Film Festival, “*Ilo Ilo*” is gentle and discerning. Sensitive performances by the four main players suit the tone, which is naturalistic and even earthy — most of the characters are shown going to the bathroom — yet ultimately poignant.



It’s 1997, and the Lims are a barely middle-class family whose aspirations are threatened by the Southeast Asian financial crisis. Teck (Chen Tian Wen) loses his salesman job but can’t admit it to his pregnant wife, Leng (Yeo Yann Yann). She’s a secretary whose work consists mostly of typing termination letters and handing out severance pay.

The movie’s original Chinese title translates as “Mom and Dad Are Not Home,” which may explain why the couple’s 10-year-old son, Jiale (Koh Jia Ler), keeps getting into trouble. In the hopes of restoring domestic tranquility, they hire a maid/nanny from Ilo Ilo province in the Philippines.

Catholic, English-speaking and no taller than her new charge, Terry (Angeli Bayani) has a lot of adjusting to do. Jiale balks at the newcomer’s presence and begins to test her limits. But Terry learns how to handle the boy, who’s initially detestable but then reveals his sweeter nature. Terry actually has more trouble with Jiale’s bossy, condescending mother. Leng becomes even snippier when she realizes that Terry and Jiale are bonding. Terry is treated more warmly by Teck, who fears his wife as much as the nanny does. And Leng’s own vulnerability is gradually revealed, notably when she falls for the pitch of a get-rich guru who’s interested only in his own fortune.

Money shadows every development in “*Ilo Ilo*,” from the demise of the family car to Jiale’s obsession with the lottery. Like a lot of older and should-be wiser gamblers, the boy is convinced he can discern the pattern in previous winning numbers. Terry has a more sensible, if hardly lucrative, strategy: She spends her day off working as hairdresser.

Not all of the movie’s details come from the director’s own childhood; Leng’s pregnancy was written into the script when the actress discovered she was expecting. But Chen did grow up with a Filipina nanny named Terry, and his affection for her is evident. That’s why the relationship between Jiale and Terry is at the center of this simple yet emotionally complex tale. In multicultural, multilingual Singapore, the two cross a substantial divide to become a sort of family.

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