

## **Catfish with Black Bean Sauce**

*Catfish with Black Bean Sauce* is an attempt at cross-cultural comedy which presents a most intriguing premise: how does a mature African-American couple and their two adopted Vietnamese children, now adults, react when the long-lost birth mother of the children comes to settle with them in Los Angeles?

The film sports some worthy veterans, Paul Winfield and Mary Alice as the adoptive parents and Kieu Chinh as the Vietnamese birth mother, and some attractive newcomers, including actress Sanaa Lathan and Vietnamese-American Chi Muoi Lo. Chi himself has a particularly heartening story. A refugee at age six who arrived in America from Vietnam with his nine brothers and three sisters, he found a life in California as an actor and fought to get this independent movie made with him as producer, writer, director, and star. One can hardly help but wish him and his dream project well, yet, yet...

So why doesn't *Catfish* prove a charming and poignant delight, rather like Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* of a few years back? Why doesn't the film quite *work*? Blame it on the fact that it is too much a one-man show. Young Chi, in his first directorial effort, holds some scenes just a little too long, can't always make clear his characters' motivations, and leaves too many dead spots in his script.

There are scenes and set pieces that work nicely: Chi gently confronting a race baiter as the manager in a black-owned bank, his incongruously parading hip-hop talk with his white roommate, the Vietnamese mother and the adoptive mother testily talking right past each other. Still, the whole just doesn't cohere. Maybe if one could lop off about 30 minutes, we would really have a sprightly new comedy and have discovered a new comic talent.

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