

A young man sits at a dinner table with his family, nervously glancing into the camera's lens like any typically self-conscious documentary subject. As the brood digs in, the authoritatively sonorous voice of a BBC narrator informs us that this pale gent is Edvard Munch. The shaky, handheld camera follows the Scandinavian painter through the cafés and cobbled streets of Christiania for ten years; an offscreen interviewer occasionally solicits opinions from bohemian intellectuals and prominent critics. Only this isn't a work of vérité (it's the 1880s, folks), that man is not really Munch, and these talking heads are neither actual salon dwellers nor pundits. They're merely actors, solemnly reenacting the life and times of an artist who helped birth an Expressionistic 20th century.

The Talent Given Us

Dir. Andrew Wagner. 2004. N/R. 97mins. Judy Wagner, Allen Wagner, Emily Wagner, Maggie Wagner.

In this nutty, heartfelt comedy, writer-director Andrew Wagner puts a Freudian twist on the American road movie: He cast his own family members in the lead roles. Retired Upper West Side couple Allen and Judy, married for nearly 50 years, are a charming pair. But a recent stroke has left Allen, a former stock trader, with impaired speech and a nonexistent libido, much to the chagrin of his wife. When daughter Emily, a divalike actor with a real-life gig on *ER*, arrives from Los Angeles, Judy collars them and eldest daughter Maggie into driving cross-country to visit their son Andrew, a reclusive screenwriter no one's heard from in a while. On the road, certain truths (e.g., Allen's past infidelities) come to light, especially once they pick up depressive friend Bumby (Judy Dixon), a PR agent on *Field of Dreams 2*.

Ostensibly a comedy about family conflict, *The Talent Given Us* is also a tender look at life's dis-

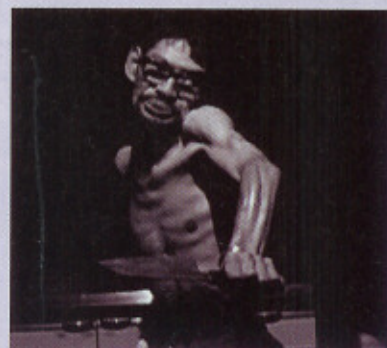
appointments. Since the Wagners are essentially impersonating themselves (Judy, a superb natural actor with Bronx-edged charisma, is particularly wonderful), part of the fun is not knowing how much of their screwball dynamic is exaggerated and how much was simply caught on the fly. Roadside encounters with actual hotel employees and freaky old acquaintances also give the film a spontaneous feel. Faux documentary, home movie or unexpurgated family therapy? *The Talent Given Us*, a funny, surprising ride with a mercurial New York clan, is all three. (Opens Fri; Angelika. See also "Meet the parents," page 101.) —Damon Smith



FRESH NEW FACE Allen Wagner makes his late-life screen debut by playing himself.

Eastern front? The term is now so broad that it's become useless for programmers and film lovers; these movies might all hail from the same region, but stylistically, they're all over the map.

When you look at what this year's **New York Asian Film Festival** has gathered under two roofs and one rubric, however, the cross-pollination potential is enough to forgive the wonkiest of



LOOK SHARP Sumida Masakiyo loses his cool in fest highlight *Late Bloomer*.

monikers. No longer relegated to the midnight-movie madness its old "Asian Films Are Go!!!" title suggested, the NYAFF is diverse enough that fans of one genre can sample a number of different delights. It's a positively utopian notion that manga nuts who show up for *Mindgame* (2004) might stick around for the gorgeous, brutal Tibetan true story *Kekexili* (2004), or that horror buffs looking to partake of the newest supernatural spookiness (now in two flavors: traditional J-fare like *Marebito* [2005] or new Korean goose-bumpers via *R-Point* [2004]) could accidentally wander into Kim Ki-duk's oddly moving *Samaritan Girl* (2004).

you get a Chinese star belting Canto-pop tunes against woodcut backgrounds, or musical numbers by a ska band and a Polynesian singer in Kabuki garb? Suzuki's mastery can't always rein in the narrative messiness, but there's delirious fun in trying to keep up with his fantastic voyage.

Like *Princess Raccoon*, the festival's other standouts can't be slotted into a single "Asian film" category, and they emerge all the better for it. Go Shibata's *Late Bloomer* (2004) focuses on a lonely physically handicapped man who, due to an unrequited love, turns his self-loathing into psychotic rage; shot in jittery black-and-white digital video, the movie's no-future despair gets under your skin, then immediately starts eating away at your internal organs. And then there's Katsuhito Ishii's *A Taste of Tea* (2004), a brilliant piss-take on Yasujiro Ozu's seasonal family films, in which grandpa is obsessed with his perfect crooning pitch, the uncle (Tadanobu Asano) regales the clan with tales of defecation, and the daughter is followed around by a giant, mute version of herself. To say that it's just a goofy bit of fun is to damn Ishii's masterpiece with faint praise; like the fest itself, its avoidance of easy categorization only makes it more of a must-see.

The New York Asian Film Festival runs from Thursday 16 to July 2 at Anthology and the ImaginAsian. See Art-house & indie cinema listings.