Review: ‘The Actresses’

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A talky but involving fakumentary that continually plays with the line between reality and fiction.

Six movie stars — playing themselves — gather for a Vogue photo shoot in a Seoul studio in “The Actresses,” a talky but involving fakumentary that continually plays with the thin line between reality and fiction. Hardly the catfight it’s expected to be, this cheekiest outing yet from writer-director E J-yong is a funny, sometimes surprisingly touching exploration of the role of actresses in South Korea’s still socially proscribed film world, though considerable knowledge of local showbiz and the thespis themselves is necessary to get the most from the movie. Asia-friendly fests should extend invites to these broads.

Nothing like this has ever been attempted in Asian cinema — let alone in South Korean cinema (http://variety.com/t/korean-cinema/) — and it’s quite a departure even for helmer E (“The Affair,” “Untold Scandal,” high school musical “Dasepo Naughty Girls”). Considering its “experimental” nature, the pic has done OK locally, with just north of 500,000 admissions since its mid-December release.

Teasing opening caption notes that “there are three kinds of people in the world — men, women and actresses,” but the pic is far from being a Robert Altman-esque “Pret-a-Porter,” with egos spiraling way out of control. As opposed to those in New York, London or Paris, Korean social conventions act as a restraint on the women’s personalities and work to the movie’s advantage. Their fur largely stays on, and by the final reels, there’s a warm, inclusive feel (as they
On Dec. 24, 2008, the stars gradually converge at a photo studio where Korean Vogue wants to organize a fashion shoot bringing together a disparate collection of names rather than just focusing on a single thesp. On the way over, they’re variously exhausted from work, hung over, jet-lagged, still playing hard to get or privately nervous about meeting their peers.

The veteran of the bunch (who range from their 20s to 60s in age), and first to arrive, is Yun Yeo-jeong, who’s immaculately polite on the surface but finds out she was a last-minute replacement for someone else. Youngest is Kim Ok-vin ("Thirst," "Dasepo"), who hides in her car until the last moment and is fully aware she’s the newbie. Somewhere in the middle is the confident, grounded Lee Mi-suk ("An Affair").

Most down-to-earth is Go Hyeon-jeong (from Hong Sang-soo’s “Woman on the Beach” and “Like You Know It All”), while the foxiest is Kim Min-heui (“Hellcats”), who arrives solo on a motorbike. Making a grand entrance last, after finally committing to the project, is mid-30s Choi Ji-woo (“Nowhere to Hide,” “Shadowless Sword”), who has the biggest rep of them all as an actress-model.

Pic was fully scripted, but enhanced by suggestions from the actresses themselves. Helmer asked them to act as if they were in a play, and six hidden HD cameras rolled simultaneously. Viewing experience is like that of being an invisible third party, with jump-cutting imparting a docu feel and some use of split-screen helping to build a sense of ensemble.

After some initial polite friction — best seen in a barbed exchange between the straight-talking Lee and the fussy Choi — the women gradually warm to each other and decide to take over the photo shoot themselves from the small army of (real-life) fashionistas, editors and stylists. As the booze starts flowing, they build a besieged solidarity (albeit temporary) as they swap gripes and confessions.

Even for auds well versed in the actresses’ careers and profiles, it’s almost impossible to know where fiction ends and reality begins. There’s a sense that some of the thesps themselves — even more than director E — are playing with viewers’ perceptions, though several genuine points about the status of their profession emerge along the way.
The three oldest — Yun, Lee and Go — are the most interesting, with clearly distinct personalities and a shared common sense beneath the rhetoric. Of the younger ones, Choi is the most confident, Kim Min-heui strangely the quietest, while Kim Ok-vin largely (and sometimes comically) takes a respectful role.

The Actresses
South Korea

Production

Crew
Camera (color, HD-to-35mm), Hong Gyeong-pyo; editors, Ham Seong-woen, Go Ah-mo; music, Jang Yeong-gyu, Lee Byeong-hun; production designer, Hong Ju-heui; supervising art directors, Kim Mi-yeong, Kim Bo-muk; costume designer, Jo Yun-mi; makeup, Son Dae-shik, Park Tae-yun; sound (Dolby Digital), Park Hyeon-su, Lee Seung-cheol, Lee Seong-jin; stylist, Gang Jeong-seon; fashion editor (for Vogue), Lee Ji-ah; assistant director, Im Ji-hun. Reviewed at CinemaxX Potsdamer Platz 10, Berlin, Jan. 22, 2010. (In Berlin Film Festival, Panorama.) Running time: 104 MIN.

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