There are many facets to a star. There are the myriad faces we see in the roles they play throughout their career. There is the personality that shines through in the many scripted and unscripted moments when actors come into contact with their public: awards acceptance speeches, press interviews, and so on. And then there is the "real" personality behind it all, what the person may (or may not) be like behind closed doors. Surely the contrasts and overlaps between stars' many faces add to their allure and mystery.

This allure is what illuminates E J-yong's The Actresses, a stylish low-budget film featuring six well-known Korean actresses playing themselves. The setting is Christmas Eve 2008 at the Vogue photo studio in Seoul. Six film stars from across multiple generations have signed on to be photographed together for the magazine's cover story. They include Kim Ok-vin, the 23 year old star of Park Chan-wook's Thirst; actress/model Kim Min-hee (Hellcats); Choi Ji-woo (TV drama Winter Sonata), whose status as a Korean Wave star in Japan sets her apart from the other five; Ko Hyun-jung (Woman on the Beach), enjoying a career revival after her high-profile divorce from a wealthy industrialist; Lee Mi-sook, the sultry lead from An Affair and Untold Scandal, whose career stretches back to the 1980s; and the sharp tongued veteran Youn Yuh-jung, whose filmography ranges from Kim Ki-young (The Insect Woman, 1972) to Im Sang-soo (A Good Lawyer's Wife, 2003).

As we watch the women arrive at the studio (each in starkly contrasting ways that highlight the differences between them), greet each other, enter makeup, try on dresses, etc. we feel like we have been given a privileged glimpse into their lives. Of course, this isn't true: the screenplay is entirely scripted, by the director and the actresses themselves. But you can guess that in the writing of this work, a lot of their real feelings, thoughts, prejudices and fears ended up in the dialogue. One of the pleasures of this film is guessing how much of what we see onscreen has been invented, and how much has a basis in real life.

The main pleasure, however, is to simply revel in the star power and charisma on display. The film has almost no plot -- in fact the entire second half consists of the women sitting around
(drinking) and waiting for a delayed shipment of jewels that are integral to the shoot. But it is brimming with energy. The dialogue is sharp and funny. A vibrant dynamic is created in the meeting of these six very different personalities and egos. The acting, with so much talent in one room feeding off each other, is on a level above most other films. We also feel for the other characters in the film -- photographers, Vogue editors, star managers and so forth (all playing themselves) -- who visibly struggle to make sure that all goes according to plan and nobody storms off the photo set. Finally, the film looks gorgeous, from the costumes to the women themselves to the production design (even if the cinematography by Hong Kyung-pyo may be a bit too shaky and hand-held for some viewers).

Director E, who has worked with many of these stars before in An Affair (1998), Asako in Ruby Shoes (2000), Untold Scandal (2003), and Dasepo Naughty Girls (2006), says he has always been struck by the offscreen energy of his actors, and that he wanted to share it more directly with his audience. While this may not be possible in a literal sense, the energy that suffuses this film is worth experiencing. Besides, Korean cinema has never produced a film quite like this one. The Actresses is in some ways just a well executed character-centered