

Past Lives (202)



A scene in a NYC bar bookends the film.

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Writer-director Celine Song leaves the fantasy world of *The Wheel of Time*, which she scripted, to give us a heart-warming story set in the present world of the romantic, yet pragmatic. Divided into three parts, hers is a spiritual film, though that of Buddhism rather than Christianity. It is infused with such wisdom and restraint that parts of it will linger and resonate within me long after the dozen or so other films that I have seen this month have faded away completely.

The opening scene is set in a bar where Nora (Greta Lee) sits speaking in Korean with Hae Sung (Teo Yoo). Her back is turned to the Caucasian man sitting next to her. Who are these three? Why is the second man left out of the conversation? We eventually find out as the scene switches to Korea "Twenty-Four Years Earlier". (Or maybe it was "Ago.")

12-year-old Na Yong (Moon Seung-ah) and Hae Sung (Leem Seung-min) are close friends. She cries a lot, on this occasion because for the first time Hae Sung has earned better grades than she. They have a crush on one another, which their mothers notice, so they set them up for a date, the two mothers chatting as the children talk while climbing about an attractive piece of modern sculpture in a park. Before their relationship can develop further Na Young's parents are

packing their belongings for their move to Canada. Her father is a filmmaker looking for greater opportunities. She will miss Hae Sung, but her mother tells her, "It's true that if you leave you lose things, but you also gain things, too." The girl herself aspires to be a writer, so she does not protest the move, changing her Korean name to the more literary-sounding Nora. As the two children walk away from school for the last time, they pause at the fork in the street, their farewell barely spoken. It seems significant that her street is uphill—maybe signifying her aspirations?—and his is at the same level.

Twelve years pass, with Hae Sung still in Korea, fulfilling his tour of duty in the military. Nora has emigrated a second time, to New York where she has become a playwright. While talking with her mother she discovers that Hae Sung has been trying to contact her through her father's FaceBook Page. Once the two connect, he realizes now that it was her name change that had prevented him from finding her sooner. Their conversation is halting at first. Now, and indeed throughout later exchanges, they communicate as much with their silent facial expressions as with words. They accommodate each other's time schedules as they engage in a series of Skype exchanges. They invite each other to come and visit, but each has a good reason for alternate plans—Hae Sung, studying to be an engineer, plans to visit China to learn Mandarin, and Nora having been invited to a writers' residency in Montauk. During their last exchange she suggests that they stop talking so she can concentrate on her writing.

At Montauk Nora, apparently the first writer to arrive, wanders through the empty rooms of the large house. Through the windows we can see a man walking toward it. The man is Arthur (John Magaro), a Jewish novelist, and as the two become acquainted, a mutual love is arises. Nora shares with him the Korean concept of In-Yun. She obviously is not among the millions of Koreans who converted to Christianity because of

the churches' support against the Japanese during the early 20th century. Buddhism still resonates within her, along with the belief in reincarnation. In this concept two people cross paths, and they may feel this in the next life, but for the connection to be lasting, there must be 8,000 layers of such connections. When Arthur asks if she really believes that, she half-jokingly says that Koreans use it as a seductive come-on to hook up with a stranger.

In the third act twelve more years have passed. Arthur and Nora are married when Hae Sung reconnects with her. He wants to come to New York to see Nora once more. He has had a girlfriend, whom he had met in China, but they are apart, at least for the time being. They agree, with Arthur consenting to the meeting, though we can tell he is a bit uneasy about this. Nora conducts Hae Sung on a tour of the city. Cinematographer Shabier Kirchner enhances this segment with some of the most beautiful shots of the Manhattan skyline viewed from Brooklyn's waterfront that I have seen—the lit-up night skyline ought to be on display or used by the NYC tourist bureau! The two talk of their past and present, and Nora again brings up In-Yun, poetically telling him that in a past life, “Perhaps I was a bird and you were the branch I landed on.” Nora tells Arthur that her visitor wants to meet him.

From their conversation in bed we can see how deeply Arthur is in love with Nora when he jokes that his role in the traditional romance would be that of the “evil white American husband standing in the way of destiny.” He expresses his unease as he says, “You make my world so much bigger and I’m wondering if I do the same for you?” He confesses that he knows he cannot fully understand her because at night in her sleep she calls out in Korean, showing that she dreams in her native language. He has learned a few phrases, probably out of respect for her parents—he’s that kind of guy—but cannot converse in the language. Thus there is an important part of

her that he can never understand or engage with.

And so we come back to that brief bar scene at the beginning of the film, this time hearing more of the Korean conversation. The two, who have never had a carnal relationship, enter into a series of "What ifs" and "Would haves..." Hae Sung realizes that it was for the best that Nora emigrated, that Korea was too small a country for her talent. (Though interestingly, Nora has revealed that her aspirations have diminished through the years: in Korea she had wanted to achieve the Nobel Prize for her writing; then in the second act, the Pulitzer; and now a Tony.) He observes that in Korea her identity was "You leave," and now it is "You stay." He accepts what has occurred, just as she accepts her loving relationship with her American husband. She no longer would be at home in Korea, nor is she entirely so in America.

The melancholy and yet positive mood of this film, well supported by a musical score that never dominates a scene, unlike the rising lush strings of most romantic movies. The many close-ups of just the faces of the characters draw us into their personal lives and might lead us to reflect upon almost forgotten memories of our own past lives. In my case, I thought for a moment of Linda, a girl in my fourth or fifth grade with whom I shared a mutual crush, Then, during Nora's explanations about In-Yun arose from that period of my life the memory of Chet Baker's unusual romantic song "My Ideal," in which the singer conjures up a fantasy ideal girl that he hopes to marry, and wonders in the last verse, "Will I recognize the light in her eyes/That no other eyes reveal/Or will I pass her by and never even know/That she is my ideal." No song that I can recall, sets romance within such a cosmic frame—in Nora's concept, one of Karma or fate, and in the old song's that of chance. Director Celine Song could not have found any actors better than Greta Lee, Teo Yoo, and John Magaro to play the members of this love triangle. In the case of Greta Lee, I will be disappointed if she is not included in

the Oscar talk that will begin toward the end of the year. And writer Song could not have better written of a love that, as the film progresses, evolves into a blend of the eros love of the Song of Solomon and the agape love of 1 Corinthians 12. This hybrid love enables the Koreans to “let go” of the other and to accept their present reality. We trust that all three characters will move on with their lives, the better for the reconnecting of the Korean almost or might-have-been lovers. Although by no means a religious film, I am pretty sure Celine Song’s film will make Visual Parables’ Top Ten list at the end of the year. And that I will eagerly look forward to her next film!

This review will be in the July issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.