

Sundance Film Review: ‘Lilting’

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Hong Khaou makes a fine debut with this quietly resonant cross-cultural chamber piece.

Barriers of age and culture, sexuality and shame are overcome with delicacy and grace in “Lilting,” a quietly resonant chamber piece about the bond that develops between a Chinese-Cambodian mother and the young British lad who was the “best friend” of her late son. Intimate and sensitive almost to a fault, this debut feature by Cambodian-born, London-based filmmaker Hong Khaou displays a sure touch with actors and a sharp ear for the stop-and-go rhythms of two people trying to prevail past not only a language gap, but also the intense privacy of their own grief. A fine fit for festivals on and beyond the gay circuit, the film may be modest in scale and impact, but its genteel approach and cross-cultural storytelling should speak to a refined arthouse niche.

Fittingly enough for a film so preoccupied with interior states, almost every scene of “Lilting” is set indoors, starting with a dreamlike opening scene that finds sixtysomething Junn (Cheng Pei-pei) conversing in Mandarin with her son, Kai (Andrew Leung). The rapport between mother and son is deeply affectionate but also playful, barbed and sometimes testy enough to strike the occasional nerve: Strong-willed Junn bemoans Kai’s increasing detachment from her life, feeling as though she’s continually coming in second to his friend and roommate, Richard.

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It’ll be clear enough to viewers from this exchange that Kai and Richard are more than just friends and roommates, even if Junn remains either ignorant or in denial. A moment later, it’s revealed that she isn’t really talking to her son but instead reliving a memory, Kai having died not too long ago under tragic circumstances. Now Junn spends her days in a London retirement home, her loneliness exacerbated by the fact that she speaks no English. But one day Richard, hoping to connect with his boyfriend’s only living family member, pays her a visit; she’s wary and unresponsive at first, making little secret of her dislike for this young man. But she begins to thaw when Richard returns with a friend, Vann (Naomi Christie), who happens to be fluent in Mandarin and English.

At first Richard brings Vann along as an interpreter for Junn and Alan (Peter Bowles), a fellow retiree who has been sweetly courting her with flowers and kisses. The early stages of their relationship, awkwardly mediated by Vann and Richard, supply an ingratiating vein of comedy that provides some relief from the generally dour proceedings, even if some of Alan’s randy-old-sod dialogue feels rather too calculated to amuse. But soon the dramatic engine kicks in as Vann

begins translating longer, deeper and inevitably more painful conversations between Richard and Junn, quietly filling in the gaps for Junn about how her son lived while carefully withholding the true nature of Richard and Kai's relationship.

The progress of the story from there is hardly surprising and doesn't build to the sort of shattering conclusion some viewers might expect, but it's always shrewdly and movingly observed along the way. Khaou's interests and sympathies extend in all directions; in perhaps the writer-director's most compassionate gesture, both Junn and Richard experience visions of Kai as a living, breathing but fleeting projection of what they've lost — a potentially maudlin spiritual touch that is handled with skill and restraint. While the characters' background details (including their occupations) are kept to a minimum, the emotions the story touches are vivid and accessible: Junn's sense of alienation upon first emigrating to London with her Chinese-French husband years ago; the intense mother-son bond that made it all the harder for Kai to open up about his sexuality, despite Richard's gentle encouragement; and the universal burden of taking responsibility for one's aging parents while still maintaining a life of one's own.

Cheng (still best known to American audiences from "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon") beautifully inhabits the role of a woman whose sense of not belonging has made her naturally distrustful of everyone around her, though Junn's own capacity for warmth, humor and generosity soon rewardingly reveals itself. Coming off memorable turns in last year's "Skyfall" and "Cloud Atlas," Whishaw, looking preternaturally sensitive with his goatee, unkempt hair and bony physique, reconfirms himself as an actor of natural charisma and striking depth; Richard's every action feels motivated by an innate sense of decency and optimism spurred by love.

Adding enormously to the central dynamic is Christie's Vann, who for all her professionalism cannot help getting caught up in Junn and Richard's emotionally messy interactions, even as her vital interpretation skills help keep the drama focused and practically grounded. The three-way bilingual conversations are paced and edited smoothly, with smart but not excessive reliance on subtitles. Apart from a slightly overused score, the tech package is quite strong on a limited budget, from the muted, wintry tones of Ula Pontikos' HD lensing to production designer Miren Maranon's spare but lovingly furnished interiors.

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Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (World Cinema — competing), Jan. 16, 2014. Running time: **86 MIN.**

Production

(U.K.) An Artificial Eye release of a Film London presentation of a Lilting production, a Microwave film, in association with BBC Films, Stink and Sums Film & Media, with the support of Film London and with funding from the National Lottery. (International sales: Protagonist Pictures, London.) Produced by Dominic Buchanan.

Crew

Directed, written by Hong Khaou. Camera (color, HD, widescreen), Ula Pontikos; editor, Mark Towns; music, Stuart Earl; music supervisor, Connie Farr; production designer, Miren Maranon; art director, Augusta Akerman; costume designer, Camille Benda; sound, Pete Cowasji; supervising sound editor, Anna Bertmark; re-recording mixer, Howard Bargroff; line producer, Donna Mabey; assistant director, Jon Midlane; casting, Kharmel Cochrane.

With

Ben Whishaw, Cheng Pei-pei, Andrew Leung, Morven Christie, Naomi Christie, Peter Bowles. (English, Mandarin dialogue)

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