



The Main Feature

Season 44 – Issue 6 – Screening 28 November 2024

Past Lives

South Korea, 2023, 105 mins, Cert 12

Director	Celine Song
Screenplay	Celine Song
Cinematography	Shabier Kirchner
Music	Christopher Bear, Daniel Rossen

Cast

Greta Lee	Nora
Teo Yoo	Hae Sung
John Magaro	Arthur
Moon Seung-ah	Na Young (Young Nora)
Leem Seung-min	Young Hae Sung
Yun Ji-hye	Nora's Mom
Choi Won-young	Nora's Dad
Ahn Min-yeong	Hae Sung's Mom



Koreans don't win the Nobel Prize for Literature", says the younger self of Korean-American playwright Nora, the central character in this debut from Korean-Canadian writer-director Celine Song. Wrong. This year's Prize went to Han Kang. This is part of a veritable explosion of Korean culture. In London alone, both the 19th Korean Film Festival and the K-Music Festival are underway as I write, and Korean artists fill the prestigious Turbine Hall at Tate Modern and the Hayward Gallery. K-pop is a global phenomenon. Sixty per cent of Netflix subscribers watched a Korean film last year.

This flourishing is partly down to the South Korean state's longstanding efforts to expand its soft power. The increasingly threatening geopolitical context is, right now, North Korea's significant military support for Russia against Ukraine, and its rumoured plans to attack the South simultaneously with any Chinese action against Taiwan.



Past Lives garnered much praise and critical acclaim from the moment it was launched at last year's Sundance Film Festival. Take Oliver Jones in the *Observer*: 'matches the hype and transcends it', 'jaw-droppingly assured first effort', 'acutely powerful rumination on the nature and purpose [sic] of love', 'remarkable and unforgettable artistic achievement.' The movie was nominated for best picture and

best original screenplay Oscars, and Baftas for best film not in English (it's bilingual), best screenplay and best actor (Tim Yeo).

In Seoul, 12-year-old girl Na Young and boy Hae Sung become best friends/childhood sweethearts. Her family soon emigrate to Canada, where she is renamed Nora. Twelve years later, she is an aspiring writer in New York, while he has done military service, studies engineering and is soon going to China to learn Mandarin. They get in touch online and make emotionally-charged video calls. Neither will abandon their plans. Nora breaks off the exchange: "I want to accomplish something here. I want to commit to my life here." She shortly meets and later marries Arthur, another writer. Meanwhile Hae Sung pursues his career, friendships and romances. Twelve years after the calls, and slightly less than half way through the film, Hae Sung visits New York for a week to see Nora.

At the beginning of the film we see the three together in a bar. In a voiceover, two observers speculate about the nature of the rendezvous and the relationships, just as we might in real life. The movie returns to this scene near the end. Now we know the backstory and hear the (bilingual) dialogue. We may try to inhabit the characters' inner worlds, perhaps relating them to our own life experiences and observations, and considering any issues this might raise.

Past Lives is, it has to be said, rather a slow film. It is also a subtle one, which invites much reading between the lines. Beyond the obvious, how for example might we explain and disentangle Nora's feelings as she weeps towards the end? Need we do so? Cinema may portray some states more eloquently than the written word.

The film embraces many of the main themes of art in our globalised, rapidly shifting twenty-first century world. This may be one reason critics raved about it. Contemporary art 'gives the impression of being uplifted by an immense wave of displacements, voyages, translations, migrations of objects and beings' (Nicolas Bourriaud). As well as the empowerment of women, the revision of masculinity, and the renegotiation of relationships, other themes include the construction of identity, the reassembling (sometimes via modern technology) of the formerly fixed orders of time and place into new groupings, and the act of remembering and workings of memory.



Past Lives shows Nora's course through such currents. Is this the result of the choices she and others make, or is it her destiny? She tells Arthur about the philosophical concept of *inyeon*: "It means providence or fate. But it's specifically about relationships between people. I think it

comes from Buddhism and reincarnation.” Nora adds, “That’s just something Koreans say to seduce people”.

In the New York bar, Nora and Hae Sung discuss whether they have *inyeon*. According to the Korean Heritage Language Research Group, its definitions include: ‘the ties between two people over the course of their lives; fate, destiny, or a predestined relationship; a karmic and dharmic [moral order] connection; the consequences of cause and effect.’¹ Puzzling over which of these each of the pair might be using is unlikely to much enhance enjoyment of the film. Rather, the notion here serves as “a beautiful way to draw our attention to the interconnectedness of all sentient beings, especially those people whom we love and care about deeply.”²

Des Coles

PS After writing these notes I asked three friends for their informed perspectives:

A Japanese-American woman (I don’t know any Korean-Americans) –

One of my favorite films. A bitter sweet love story. A love of life, friends, the country, family and relationship which is so relatable to anyone in all generations and which are universal topics. Nora mentioned the meaning of *inyeon* to Arthur because perhaps she realized Nora and Hae Sung were connected in so many levels but due to choices they made in life, they couldn’t be together as that is not their destiny. I remember this part well as Japanese too have *inyeon* philosophy and was surprised to know that Korean people have the same philosophy from Buddhism. A beautifully delivered universal love story.

A former ambassador to Korea (not the UK ambassador) –

Judging from the trailer, it mirrors to some extent the story of one of the local staff at the Embassy in Seoul during our time there who married with great pomp a guy whom she had met on the bus on a trip to [the capital city of the European country the embassy represents] but dumped him shortly afterwards to hook with an old school chum that she had encountered on social media. It must have been *inyeon*!

It’s now 20 years since we left Korea and I don’t think that I could improve on your description of how the country has developed culturally and exported its wonderful vibrancy to the rest of the world. We still miss it as the place we loved most of the many wonderful postings that we had. The Korean Ambassadors here do keep in touch.

A film buff -

I can’t remember *inyeon* but I do recall the idea of fate influencing me at the time I saw it - how we all find ourselves making decisions that alter our lives; or are we fated to make those choices anyway? For me it’s such a poignant film. It’s hard to be sure of the feelings these friends share and to know what they are really feeling behind their gentle manners.



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¹ Dr Lisa Jeon, the Group’s co-founder, quoted in <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20240320-past-lives-the-korean-word-for-eternal-love-ancient-buddhist-roots> (21/3/24).

² Dr Victor Fan, reader in film studies at King's College London, quoted in the same piece.

Comments and reactions to: **The Taste of Things**

No of reaction slips received = 26

Average score = 7.04

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	2	~	2	3	8	7	3	1

Not really my scene as a vegetarian

Beautiful cinematography and storyline

Very thin plot. Beautiful in parts. Oddly engaging, but a bit long

Mesmerising!

Pace and space plus the impressions delighted. And NO music. Hurrah!

Too slow with not a lot happening. Typical French!

Beautifully lit and photographed

Interesting combination of beautiful location and creative dishes

A feast for the eyes

A beautiful film with a lovely setting in a château. It was interesting to see the kitchen implements used

Not a film to watch on an empty stomach. A bit long and slow but enjoyable

I enjoyed the film but it was rather too long and drawn out. Beautifully filmed and acted

Position	Film	Average score
1	The Great Escaper	8.00
2	The Taste of Things	7.04
3	The Color Purple	6.77
4	Winners	6.00
5	Barbie	5.59

Forthcoming attraction: 12 December 2024 – **The Holdovers**



The format may be unsurprising but there is nothing unsurprising about just how good and enjoyable this is... this is the kind of bittersweet, character-dialogue driven piece they just don't do anymore. Mark Kermode

It is the genius of Paul Giamatti to make us, over the course of this great movie, not just re-evaluate and learn to respect this mess of a man but actually... to love him. New Statesman

It is both melancholy and funny as these characters develop the capacity to engage emotionally and take off in new directions. It is affecting without ever being treacly or sentimental and the performances are tremendous. Spectator

Club website: www.wncc.org.uk. Prefer to leave your comments on the film and your score online rather than on paper? Email to reactions@wncc.org.uk by Wednesday 4 December 2024
Discs of previous shows are available to hire for a modest fee.