

Past Lives: Neither the road taken nor the one *not* taken is all that intriguing

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Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

—“The Road Not Taken,” Robert Frost, 1915

Past Lives, a film written and directed by Celine Song, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival precisely a year ago and has since received countless awards and honors. It was nominated for the Golden Bear at the 2023 Berlin film festival and in five categories at the recent Golden Globes. Various regional or local groups of US critics have honored it, including in Austin, Boston, Chicago, Dallas-Fort Worth, Los Angeles, New York, San Diego, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, St. Louis, Washington, Florida and Georgia. One could go on. The global praise has been almost universal.

The film is straightforward enough. It opens in South Korea, focused on two 12-year-olds, Na Young (Seung Ah Moon) and Hae Sung (Seung Min Yim), who go to school together. They have a budding interest in one another, but Na Young moves away with her family to Toronto. She later resettles in New York City, where she becomes a writer. Hae Sung remains in South Korea, through his years in college, in the military and, eventually, at work, as an engineer.

Twelve years after the Young family’s emigration, Hae Sung (now Teo Yoo) tracks down his old classmate, now calling herself Nora Moon (Greta Lee), and they speak a few times online. She tells Hae Sung at a certain point that she wants to take a break in their communications, as she wishes to focus on her writing and her life in New York. Nora then meets Arthur, an

American writer, and they marry. Hae Sung finds a girlfriend.

Another dozen years go by. Hae Sung, now without a love in his life, comes to New York to see Nora. The two of them spend time visiting the sights of the city, including the Statue of Liberty. In him, Nora sees what her life might have been like, “the road not taken,” if she had remained in South Korea. Arthur, Nora and Hae Sung go out together for an evening. Sitting with the two men in a bar, she translates for and navigates between them. Despite Arthur’s misgivings, he and Hae Sung get along, and Arthur says, “I’m really glad you came here. It was the right thing to do.” In the end, Hae Sung, obviously saddened to be returning to Seoul, suggests to Nora they may meet in another life.

The actors perform with honesty and dignity. Greta Lee is particularly memorable. In a deliberately understated film, she is a mischievous, even troublesome presence, hinting at an anger and sensuality that, unhappily, largely remain beneath the surface here.

Again, as we have pointed out before, films like *Past Lives* achieve recognition and even a certain popularity these days in part because of what they are *not*. In a sea of stupid, noisy bombast and special effects, which encourage what’s least reflective and developed in an audience, such a work may stand out.

But merely standing out—or apart—from the crowd is not a virtue in itself. South Korean and Korean-American films or films with Asian performers have made an impact in North America in recent years, including *Parasite*, *Minari* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. But those films, especially the first two, had a greater social reach and substance than *Past Lives*.

This is not a bad film, but it is an intensely and

conspicuously middle class film. In an interview with the *Hollywood Reporter*, director Song asserted that, in previous times, “to move to another town, you’d get on a horse. It used to be a lot harder to be mobile. But now we have become more mobile. And of course, we all have professional pursuits and a lot of our professional pursuits require traveling, or moving to a new place, or changing—changing career or changing company, or whatever it may be. We move from place to place. And that is so much what the movie is about.”

“Of course, we all have professional pursuits.” This is a film for and about people who are shifting geographically or occupationally from one portion of the middle class to another, quitting certain milieus and circumstances, and encountering and entering others. This may create gaps, awkwardness, perhaps regrets, even genuine sadness. Not all the identities, associated with different ages and locales, can be made to cohere or co-exist. In the various transitions and relocations, something is inevitably lost—in the process, places and individuals get left behind.

In *Past Lives*, Nora, speaking of Hae Sung during his visit to New York, tells Arthur it is odd to see her childhood sweetheart “be this grown-up man with a normal job and a normal life. He’s so Korean. He still lives with his parents, which is really Korean. And he has all these really Korean views about everything. And I feel so not Korean when I’m with him. But also, in some way, more Korean? It’s so weird. I mean, I have Korean friends, but he’s not, like, Korean-American. He’s Korean-Korean. ... He’s really masculine in this way that I think is so Korean.”

In her interview with the *Hollywood Reporter*, Song added: “Is Nora the professional working writer person in New York? Yes. Is she also the little girl that she left behind in Korea, only speaks Korean and has all these ambitions and all these issues? Absolutely. I think that we can say that about all of us. ... So it is really about the many selves that we are. And it’s about both accepting that and reconciling that and letting go of the idea that you’re just one thing.”

This is a theme, but it’s not a major theme. For people who are suffering economically, for people losing their jobs and homes, for people fleeing war and poverty, for people in Gaza and other scenes of carnage, it is not a central issue—“the many selves that we are ... and accepting that.” Personal lyrics of the

smallest scope have a place, but the type of psychological inertia and self-involvement on display here will not make a deep impact on those who need art and culture the most.

Late in the film, Arthur suggests to Nora that “Our story’s just so boring. We met at an artists’ residency. Slept together because we both happened to be single. We realize we both live in New York, so we move in together to save money on rent. We got married so you could get a green card. So...”

Their story *is* a bit boring. However, this is what the critics love and admire at present. It is what a portion of the “independent” film industry tends to be built around, the small likes and dislikes of sections of the upper middle class, who are also influenced and affected by great events, but would rather not think about them at this point, who would rather vigorously distract themselves with problems of personal identity of various kinds. *Past Lives* speaks to this mood.



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