

Coming Home Again

Hong Kong-born director Wayne Wang has had an intriguing career, starting with a breakthrough comedy “Chan Is Missing” (1982). He earned international fame with the ambitious “Joy Luck Club” (1993), and, sought after by Hollywood, he came to direct some mainstream Hollywood productions like “Maid in Manhattan” (2002) and “Last Holiday”(2006). More recently, he has returned to more personal, independent pictures, like the just released “Coming Home Again.” Based on a New Yorker personal essay by award-winning Korean-American writer Chang-rae Lee, this intimate family drama about a mother, a son, and the burden of family expectations, world premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival last year and is now streaming in the Washington, DC area (*the film runs 86 minutes and is not rated, though it contains nothing objectionable*).

The film takes place over one full day (though leavened by flashbacks), during which Chang-rae (Justin Chon), a first generation Korean-American, has returned to his family home in San Francisco to prepare his mother’s traditional New Year’s Eve dinner. He also has taken on the task of caring for his ailing mother (Jackie Chung), suffering through the last stages of stomach cancer. He wants to fulfill his role as the supportive son, but he must come to terms with his own conflicted emotions. His father (John Lie) is also present in the family apartment but appears as a fugitive figure, little engaged with his wife’s care.

The food preparation in the film forms the symbolic sinew between Chang-rae and his mother, a meal exquisitely prepared that signals how much he cares for her and how much he owes her. (Fans of Asian cooking movies will be reminded—with mouths watering--of films like “Eat, Drink, Man, Woman,” and “Juro Dreams of Sushi,”). Note: for this film, the food was prepared by Korean-American master chef Corey Lee from a noted San Francisco restaurant. The care and precision of the food prep also gives the young man time to reflect on the intense relationship between him and his mother..

The arrival of Chang-rae’s younger sister (July Kim) for the holiday introduces another family dynamic, as she cannot accept her father’s verdict that Mom has little time left and no desire to accept more painful cancer treatments. She urgently challenges her mother about her intentions in an exquisite, agonized sequence made all the more touching by being shown in a fixed longshot with only murmured dialogue. That bedside scene is one of many quiet, perfectly centered shots by Wang framing the apartment in plain but fraught images so reminiscent of the great Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu.

The overall reticence of the film is so strong that certain disruptive events at the quiet family dinner ring out like thunder claps. I would expect many viewers would find “Coming Home Again” just too slow and restrained, yet, the film’s restraint appropriately represents the culture it portrays, which, together with a most effective cast, offers patient filmgoers much to admire.