

AURORA FILMS

PRESENTS



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
2022 OFFICIAL SELECTION

RETURN TO SEOUL

A FILM BY DAVY CHOU

2022 – FRANCE, GERMANY, BELGIUM, CAMBODIA, QATAR – DRAMA –
FRENCH, KOREAN, ENGLISH – 119'

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

On an impulse to reconnect with her origins, Freddie, 25, returns to South Korea for the first time, where she was born before being adopted and raised in France. The headstrong young woman starts looking for her biological parents in a country she knows so little about, taking her life in new and unexpected directions.

INTERVIEW WITH DAVY CHOU

Why did you want to tell this story?

In 2011, I went to present my first feature-length documentary, *Golden Slumbers*, at the Busan International Film Festival in South Korea. A friend of mine, Laure Badufle, came with me to show me what she called "*her country*". Laure was born in South Korea and was adopted in France when she was one year old. She returned to the country of her birth for the first time when she was twenty-three and lived there for two years before going back to France. But before we left, she warned me: "*We won't be seeing my Korean biological father*". Their first encounter hadn't gone well. We met up in Busan, and after two days at the festival, she said to me: "*Look, I've sent my father some messages. We're meeting in Jinju tomorrow, an hour and a half away from here. Will you come with me?*" We took a bus, and I found myself having lunch with her biological father and grandmother. I found that experience very moving. In their exchanges, there was a whole mix of emotions, sadness, bitterness, incomprehension, and regrets... There was even a tragic-comical dimension because you could tell that they were incapable of understanding each other. We had brought an interpreter with us and she had a lot of difficulties translating my friend's fits of anger and rendering them with the politeness Korean customs required. As I was profoundly moved by this situation, I decided that one day, maybe, I would make a film about it. After the release of *Diamond Island*, my first fiction feature film, I started thinking about it again. I talked to Laure about it and she was very keen.

The film explores the theme of international adoption but also goes beyond that. Freddie is trying to find herself. She constantly breaks away from the identities that are ascribed to her.

What put me on that track was the story of my friend who, in passing, now offers therapy for adoptees and adoptive parents. I was inspired by her tenacious, unpredictable character. Whilst I was writing the script, I asked her lots of questions because, of course, I wasn't born in South Korea, I'm not a woman, and I wasn't adopted. That distance made me question my legitimacy to tell this story. But at one point, there was an opening and I also found myself in this project. I was born in France to parents born in Cambodia. I went to Cambodia for the first time when I was twenty-five. My relationship with the country was similar to Freddie's relationship with South Korea at the start of the film. I was far from imagining that this return to my roots would shake up the way I understood who I was. Life brings you to reconfigure identities as well as your relationship with the world and yourself. The perspective that interested me, from my point of view as a racialised French Director, was the path taken by someone who continually refuses to fit in with a predefined classification or to have people speak for her. Freddie spends her time reinventing herself, redefining herself and reasserting herself. That's the universal theme of identity. Who am I? What is my place? Where do I stand compared to others?

To what extent did Park Ji-Min, who plays Freddie, participate in the composition of her character?

I met her through a friend, Erwan Ha Kyoon Larcher, who is an artist and a Korean adopted. We talked about the film, and the character made him think of Park Ji-Min so he put me in touch with her. She is a plastic artist whose work is fascinating. She was born in South Korea and arrived in France when she was eight years old. I obviously wanted someone with ties to South Korea, not just an East Asian actress, which is something that had been suggested at first. So, for the purposes of the casting, I met quite a few people of South Korean origin who had been adopted. I listened to what they had to say and that brought a lot to the film. But when I met Park Ji-Min, who isn't adopted, she seemed the obvious choice. She had never acted but, intuitively and impressively, she was able to reach the extreme emotions, partway between ultra-violence and ultra-vulnerability, necessary for Freddie's character. I had worked on the script for three years and with her, as she wasn't a professional actor, I suddenly found myself face-to-face with her experience as a racialized person who had grown up in France. During the time we spent preparing the film, she really put me on the spot. She came to me with lots of questions and even criticisms of the scenario. She questioned the character's relationship to femininity, gender, and men. These discussions, which were sometimes quite tough and which lasted several months, obliged me to question myself. I realised that my position as a male film director had possibly led me to reproduce certain clichés. Ji-Min and I rapidly became very close and this relationship built on trust was the foundation that allowed us to pull through that period together. I understood that I had to change my perspective and that was very liberating. I also became aware that creation could only happen collaboratively and on an equal footing with her. Freddie's character is the fruit of that common endeavour.

What did she allow you to shake up in terms of gender stereotypes?

The nature of the balance of power and domination between Freddie and the male characters, for example, and in particular with her Korean father, became clearer. Freddie's anger also came from her need to overturn that balance of power. Furthermore, I had created a character who was possibly more traditional in terms of dress and seduction. Those are things that blocked Ji-Min who immediately saw them as the reproduction of a male viewpoint. With her and the costume supervisor, Claire Dubien, we thought a lot about the character's stylisation. We finally thought of Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* by George Miller. Gradually, she became a warrior. Freddie isn't scared of expressing her anger. It is often what allows her to break free. By resisting, by creating a commotion, she obliges people to reconsider the way they see things. I see her as a sort of agent of chaos who seeks out vitality and the change that stems from that. She's single-minded and faces up to her fears and anxieties. I also wanted to move away from what you expect or imagine of how female Asian characters are represented in films. Often, they are delicate heroines, whose inner character is filmed. In this case, we have an explosive character who isn't just a nice girl and who goes against the grain.

The story takes place over eight years. Why did you choose to follow this character over a long period?

I've always been moved by films that accompany us through full life stories. Each time, in the three parts of the film, we are with Freddie at a very precise moment in her life. These successive layers of existence give depth to her character. I wanted to challenge and resist the rather easy idea of self-acceptance as an ultimate goal. On questions of identity and integration, you often find yourself facing this sort of dumbed-down fictional plot wherein, with the wave of a magic wand, the characters are suddenly at peace with themselves. In stories about adoption, you might think that the encounter with the biological parents could heal the wound. Yet, in the accounts I've heard, that encounter tends to be the moment when all the problems start! If I look back at my previous films, this idea of the time you need to find the right distance has also been decisive and I think that is related to my own story. In my documentary *Golden Slumbers*, I looked back at the golden age of Cambodian cinema in the 1960s, when my grandfather, whom I never met, was a film producer in Cambodia. There was already this schizophrenia between a very diverse past and absolute unawareness of that past. And in *Diamond Island*, I filmed young people of today who dream of modernisation but act as if the genocide never took place. Perhaps, I subconsciously found myself in the question of the right distance that Freddie also faces and has to find relative to her personal history.

The breakdown in communication between the characters is often resolved thanks to music. What is expressed through that music?

The different languages, French, Korean, and English follow on from each other and whirl around together, which already portrays how impossible it is to really express things. Something is lost in translation. The music makes up for something that is hindered by language. In the scene where she dances, Freddie had to be totally liberated, to free herself of all her negative emotions and set them ablaze. At that moment, she feels as though she's up against a wall, and everyone wants to assign her a Korean identity. So she asserts herself with pure joy and with absolute strength and intensity that she throws back in the face of the world, like a provocation. At another point in the film, Freddie's biological father, played by the masterful Oh Kwang-Rok who has often played in Park Chan-Wook's films, has her listen to a piece of music on his telephone. In the first part, we can feel that he is totally incapable of communicating and that he is extremely tactless. Freddie, rightly or wrongly, gets annoyed and she shows her anger about the way he spews his grief all over her. When he plays this piece of music for her, it's as if he was expressing everything he hadn't managed to say to her. In the film, music is a point of contact, where two people who are separated by a violent and irreconcilable story, manage for just one minute to see each other, reach out to each other, and understand each other.

Seoul evolves at the same time as our heroine. At the start of the film, it's as if space is indefinite, and there's a shallow depth of field. As time goes by, the frame broadens and Freddie makes the town her own.

To start with, I was very excited to do exactly the opposite of what you expect from a travel film, where you have lots of outdoors shots. I wanted a film that took place indoors. That's also down to my experience. In Seoul, we spent a lot of time in bars and restaurants. I think

that this evolution portrays the inner voyage of the character who is confronted with herself and her past. Freddie is a little voracious. She absorbs the energy of the people around her, transforming them at will, bringing them to life. This demiurgeous, extremely upbeat aspect possibly stems from her fear. The way she reacts is to take control of her environment and mistreat it. In the second part of the film, it's as if she were measuring herself in comparison to extremes: she lives at the very top of a building where she has a bird's-eye view of the city and at the same time, we follow her through the underground with all the subversive figures to be found in Seoul nightlife. In the third part of the film, she seems more serene, even if, as she says, this serenity could disappear in the blink of an eye. Things are always unstable, unresolved, and ever-changing. That is what interests me and is also what we learn from the character.

ABOUT DAVY CHOU

Davy Chou is a French director and producer born in 1983, based between Paris and Phnom Penh.

He co-founded the French production company Vycky Films and the Cambodian production company Anti-Archive.

Grandson of Cambodian producer Van Chann, Davy Chou directed in 2011 "Golden Slumbers" (Forum - Berlinale 2012), a documentary about the birth of Cambodian cinema in the 1960s and its brutal destruction by the Khmer Rouge in 1975. He has also directed several short films including "Cambodia 2099" (Directors' Fortnight - Cannes 2014).

His first feature, "Diamond Island", produced by Aurora Films and co-produced by Anti-Archive and Vandertastic, was awarded the SACD Prize at Critics' Week- Cannes 2016.

His second feature, "Return to Seoul", produced by Aurora Films and co-produced by Vandertastic and Frakas Productions, is selected at Un Certain Regard – Cannes 2022.

In parallel, Davy Chou continues his activity as a producer: he has recently produced Cambodian filmmakers, including Kavich Neang ("White Building" - Venice Film Festival 2021) and was also line producer on "Onoda: 10,000 Nights in the Jungle" by Arthur Harari (Un Certain Regard – Cannes 2021).

FILMOGRAPHY

2022	RETURN TO SEOUL Feature, 119'
2016	DIAMOND ISLAND Feature, 100'
2014	CAMBODIA 2099 Short, 21'
2011	GOLDEN SLUMBERS Feature length documentary, 96'
2008	EXPIRED Short, 10'
2007	DAVY CHOU'S FIRST FILM Short, 10'

CAST

Freddie	Park Ji-Min
The Korean Dad	Oh Kwang-Rok
Tena	Guka Han
The Aunt	Kim Sun-Young
Maxime	Yoann Zimmer
André	Louis-Do de Lencquesaing
The Grandmother	Hur Ouk-Sook
Lucie	Émeline Briffaud
Kay-Kay	Lim Cheol-Hyun
Dongwan “The French-speaking Friend”	Son Seung-Beom
Jiwan “The Fringe Lover”	Kim Dong-Seok

CREW

Director	Davy Chou
Script writer	Davy Chou
Producers	Charlotte Vincent Katia Khazak
Coproducers	Hanneke Van Der Tas Cassandre Warnauts Jean-Yves Roubin
Executive producers	Ha Min-Ho Davy Chou
Line producers	Ha Min-Ho Diana Păroiu (Romania)
Cinematographer	Thomas Favel
Gaffers	Bertrand Prévot Kang Dong-Gun
Key grip	Jérémy Tondeur
Sound engineer	Dirk Bombey
First assistant director	Camille Fleury
Script supervisor	Marion Bernard
Artistic advisor	Jeunghae Yim
Art directors	Shin Bo-Koung Choi Chi-Youl
Costume supervisors	Claire Dubien Yi Choong-Yun
Key makeup & hair	Kim Ju-Young Pascale Guégan
Production manager	Rémi Veyrié
Production manager (South Korea)	K. Jonathan Park
Editor	Dounia Sichov
Sound designer	Vincent Villa
Color timer	Yannig Willmann
Original score	Jérémie Arcache Christophe Musset
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