

RETURN TO SEOUL

Monday, May 1, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Karen Gordon | Original Cin | Rated R | 119 Mins.

It's the second feature from French-Cambodian writer-director Davy Chou. Polished, complex, and edgy, the film is a character study of a modern woman whose choices rattle her sense of self.

The film played in the Un Certain Regard program at last year's Cannes Festival and made the long-list for the Oscars Foreign Language Film category. (It was Cambodia's official entry to the Oscars). It's also nominated for an Independent Spirit Awards in the Best International Film Category.

Park plays 25-year-old Freddie, a Parisian who is in Seoul for a two-week vacation. It's the first time she's been back since she was adopted as an infant by the French couple who raised her in France.

Freddie is self possessed, confident, open, and impulsive, with a hint of danger around the edges. There's something both a little bit refined and a little bit punky about her. She's staying with a woman named Tena (Guka Han) who, like Freddie, speaks French and English. Out at a bar for drinks, Tena not only translates the Korean language but the cultural nuances as well, which Freddie seems to delight in ignoring.

Tena's friend asks Freddie if she's going to try and find her biological parents. He explains that most of the adoptions of Korean babies were handled by a well-known agency and they have a process for reuniting adoptive children with the birth parents.

Freddie claims that she had no plans to so, but the next day, she goes. The agency is able to locate both her parents, but only her father (Oh Kwang-Rok) responds, inviting Freddie to come visit on the weekend. The family lives about an hour outside of Seoul.

With Tena along as a translator, Freddie meets her father, and other members of her biological family, including her grandmother and an aunt (Kim Sung-Young) who speaks enough French to also provide a bridge, at least when it comes to language.

For the first time since we've met her, Freddie seems a bit thrown by the whole experience.

Freddie's father expresses a lot of guilt at having to give her up, and his emotional response seems to repel her, at least initially. Meeting with her biological paternal family affects her emotionally in ways she didn't anticipate.

It's uncomfortable, but it won't be the last time they meet.

The film takes place over the course of eight years, needle dropping into points in Freddie's life: she finds a career, gets into a relationship, spends more time with her birth father and his family, and waits to see if her biological mother will respond to the agency and agree to meet her.

Chou's script isn't overly concerned with the filling in background details of some of the people who show up in her life.

For instance, the relationship with her father is at times strained by what seem to be his aggressive way of relating to her. He drinks too much and reaches out to her when he's drunk. Was he an alcoholic to begin with? Or did coming face-to-face with the daughter he gave up trigger this phase in his life? The movie doesn't give us much in the way of background.

But the same is true for Freddie. Chou doesn't give us much history or context, focusing us on her in the present tense. That puts a lot of pressure on his lead actress Park who, remarkably, has never acted before. It's hard to overstate how fabulous this performance is.

Freddie seems to be up-front, but she never fully shows her hand, and isn't completely straightforward. She's vibrant, alive, often testing people or pushing the limits, approachable but also capable of sudden cruelty.

Ultimately those qualities lead her to situations that affect her own sense of self, bringing out unpredictable emotions. Park gives her an outward playful quality, but as things unfold, we can see that she's thrown in small subtle ways. Park's compelling, charismatic presence is what drives the film and makes it hard to shake.

Writer-director Chou based the script on the experience of his friend Laure Badulfe who, like his lead character, was adopted as an infant from Korean and raised in France, and who sought out her biological parents.

Return to Seoul is about adoption, and the kinds of inner questions about self and identity that are suddenly and unexpectedly triggered by connecting with biological parents. In a broader sense, most of us have events and encounters that rattle one's sense of self and personal identity are universal and relatable.

Those themes aside, what holds our attention in Return to Seoul is this character.

Freddie's a modern French woman who has had a terrific life, loving parents and who prizes her strength and independence. But humans are complex. By the end of the film, the young woman who opened the door to her past has been changed in ways that the character we met at the beginning of the film could not have anticipated. In French and Korean with English subtitles.



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THE BLUE CAFTAN

Monday, May 15, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by David Rooney | The Hollywood Reporter | Not Rated | 118 Mins.

The opening frames of *The Blue Caftan* caress the fluid folds and luxuriate in the sheen of a length of petroleum blue silk as the dressmaker's hands slowly come into view, manipulating the fabric with obvious love and respect. Later, he explains to a customer that the material must glide over the body's contours, allowing it to flow unimpeded. That principle also guides Maryam Touzani's gentle observation of her characters in a film of exquisite sensuality and sadness. The Moroccan writer-director returns to Cannes three years after her well-received debut feature, *Adam*, with a work of even more transfixing delicacy and restraint.

The slow-burn yet richly emotional drama should land attention by virtue of the relative paucity of queer films in Maghreb cinema alone. But this is compelling storytelling by any standard, its supple rhythms hypnotic, its atmosphere potent and its hushed tone and intimate camerawork affording us the closest possible access to three characters who are studying one another. The actors playing those three points of a complicated triangle could not be better.

In one of the oldest medinas in the northwestern Moroccan city of Salé, Halim and his wife Mina run a caftan shop where he hand-sews made-to-measure garments according to vanishing traditions he learned from his late father.

The impatience of customers wanting faster service and the backlog of orders necessitate hiring an apprentice, Youssef, a quiet young man eager to learn everything that Halim teaches him about pattern-making, tailoring and embroidery. In particular, Halim's elaborate work on a splendid blue caftan for the pushy wife of a town official fascinates Youssef.

The attention to detail of Virginie Surdej's camera in these work scenes — the spools of golden thread, the precision needlework, the regal braiding and intricate construction of long rows of Rouleau loop buttonholes — conveys the love that Halim pours into his trade. Youssef's responsiveness appears driven as much by the tailor's dedicated craftsmanship as by the unspoken but clearly mutual physical attraction between the two men.

"A caftan must be able to survive the one who wears it. Pass from mother to daughter. Resist time," Halim tells him. Those words softly resonate with notions of what makes a relationship durable, as well as the encroaching obsolescence of handcrafted tailoring in favor of machine fabrication.

Mina, a bluntly plainspoken woman of Berber origin, initially encourages Youssef, since her husband has more work than he can comfortably handle and is not inclined to rush. Previous apprentices have lost interest and moved on quickly. But at the same time, she watches the handsome new employee like a hawk, clocking with increasing irritability every doe-eyed gaze he directs at Halim and every lingering glance that Halim returns. Mina even accuses Youssef of stealing fabric, docking his pay despite him convincing Halim that he's no thief. Having taken care of himself since he was 8 years old, he tells Mina that money comes and goes and makes little difference to him.

Touzani deftly uses misdirection to suggest a loveless marriage between sickly Mina, the details of her illness revealed only gradually, and Halim, whose inability to suppress his gay desires steers him regularly to anonymous sex in private rooms at the local hammam. When Mina initiates sex with him it appears to be an act of desperate need for his affection, typical of a drama steeped in longing.

But beneath the married couple's subdued conversations, a deep reciprocal love, even mutual gratitude, becomes clear, especially once Mina's health begins to decline. This creates painful conflict for the taciturn tailor when Youssef reveals his feelings in an intensely moving physical display in the store, and the older man's rejection of him causes the apprentice to quit.

However, when he sees that the store has remained closed for an extended period, Youssef is too kind and too emotionally invested to stay away. He calls on the couple at home and graciously assumes responsibility for the business while gradually becoming a member of their family.

It's easy to assume where the drama is headed as the feelings among all three characters intensify. But Touzani's stripped-down screenplay never takes predictable paths, even when it does fulfill expectations. This is a film of overwhelming tenderness — in exchanged glances or tactile moments as fleeting as one hand lightly touching another. Among the loveliest scenes is Halim washing Mina's hair for her; or Mina asking forgiveness for accusing Youssef of dishonesty and failing to fess up even when she discovered she was wrong. This reduces the young man to convulsive tears, prompting Halim finally to abandon his reserve and offer comfort.

The final stretch brings devastating sorrow, a wave of affecting sentiment that's entirely earned, even noble, as the depths of understanding between Halim and Mina, and the roots of their marriage are detailed.

Rather than reminding Youssef he's an outsider in the domestic arrangement, these revelations offer him a more profound connection, not just to Halim but also to Mina. And the way the blue caftan comes into play in a conclusion that marks the movie's sole use of non-diegetic music is just beautiful. The same goes for the brief final shot, a simple image that speaks volumes with the same elegant economy that characterizes this stirring love story.

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SAINT OMER

Monday, June 19, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Michael Phillips | Chicago Tribune | Not Rated | 122 Mins.

A real-life murder trial becomes a singularly moving courtroom drama.

“Saint Omer” marks the narrative feature debut of the French documentary filmmaker Alice Diop. Set mostly in the northeastern French town of the title, it concerns a Paris professor following a murder trial there as primary research for her next book. That book, whose working title (which her publisher doesn’t like) is “Medea Castaway,” ties into the legacy of the Euripidean Medea myth and a forbidding question for the ages: How does a dramatist effectively humanize the act of infanticide?

“A woman who has killed her baby can’t really expect any sympathy,” says the accused murderer, a Senegalese emigrant living in France in “Saint Omer,” explaining what she has experienced in prison since her arrest. She speaks with calm, unsettling certainty; she’s at once resigned and resolved to speak the truth. Then she adds: “I shared their horror.”

Diop’s film, which won awards at the Venice Film Festival, is set up Janus-style as a mirrored consideration of two main characters, the accused and an increasingly invested observer. Working with screenwriter Amrita David, co-writer and director Diop, born of Senegalese parents, begins with a visual premonition. At night, on the beach, the accused murderer played by Guslaigie Malanda walks along the sand with her 15-month-old daughter wrapped in a blanket. The woman dreaming this, the academic and novelist played by Kayije Kagame, is envisioning what she’s about to learn: the story of how that mother got to this point in her life, and why.



On trial in the courtroom, Malanda’s fiercely contained character, Laurence, reveals details of the horror, coaxed by her empathetic defense attorney (Aurélia Petit) and badgered by the prosecutor (Robert Cantarella). An aspiring Ph.D. student in philosophy, Laurence believes she was cursed by her family for becoming, in her words, “an Oreo,” learning to speak and act like a white Parisian woman with colonialist airs.

Twice her age, a weak and self-serving man still married to someone else, Laurence’s lover (Xavier Maly) apparently kept Laurence, and then their unwanted child, squirreled away from the rest of his life. This “isolated, invisible woman,” as the counselor calls her, turned inward, started hallucinating and finally killed her child at high tide.

Novelist Rama watches this trial unfold in her own, related state of suspended animation. She too has a fraught relationship with a Senegalese mother. She too knows the ever-present Othering of being a Black woman praised (tolerated?) by white colonialist traditional France for being so “well-spoken” and “intelligent.” There are other links between the women as well.



In so many instances, films about someone forever changed by someone else’s tragedy have a way of selling the someone-else short in dramatic terms. Not here. “Saint Omer” balances screen time, and our appreciation of Laurence and Rama, with unerring shrewdness. By the end, with Nina Simone’s version of the Rodgers & Hart standard “Little Girl Blue” accompanying images of the empty streets of Saint Omer, Diop has turned a straightforward premise into the stuff of unassuming, unexpected and authentic poetry.

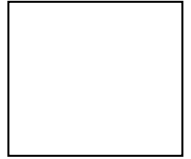
The movie is inspired by a real case, one which Diop herself followed very closely to the point of obsession. “Saint Omer” proceeds with a steady rhythm that never feels studied; the courtroom sequences play out in widely varying stretches of screen time, the first and longest running 40-plus minutes, not a minute wasted. Diop’s work as a documentarian, best known for the panoramic French societal portrait “Nous,” serves her well here. And this is a film without a speck of faux-documentary fakery, deployed all too often to impart a lazy sense of urgency and realism. “Saint Omer” relishes the opportunity to observe someone in closeup, listening, processing, remembering.

The judge in the fictionalized movie’s court of law, played with remarkable concentration and command by Valérie Dréville, gradually joins the crucial faces and voices in the drama unfolding. So much in the courtroom, and in Rama’s time away from it, back in Paris or lunching with the accused’s mother, circles the matter of mothers and daughters, “outsiders” and insiders, immigrants in modern-day France facing bone-deep cultural dislocation. Those issues are part of everything in the narrative, but above all “Saint Omer” is a singularly moving courtroom drama. It bodes extremely well for this filmmaker’s next feature.

Having already swept Ireland’s equivalent of the Academy Awards and won festival accolades, not to mention setting both its young star and its director up for stellar careers should they want them, the film’s appearance among this year’s Oscar contenders feels more like a victory lap than an endgame. One more statue would up its profile, but that’s almost irrelevant. What matters is that The Quiet Girl is, quite simply, a genuine work of art by a genuinely empathetic artist, and one of the single most moving, heartfelt, and heartbreaking movies from any country in the last decade. That only sounds like hyperbole until you see it. After that, the sentence reads as a huge understatement.

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RETURN TO SEOUL

"Jagged, restless, and rivetingly unpredictable."

—*IndieWire*

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complex relationships."

—*The Playlist*

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The New York Times

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