



T A P E PRESENTS: BUT WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?

Lilting

Lilting – the debut feature by Cambodian-born, UK-based Hong Khaou – is a tender, low-key examination of grief, fractured communication and the inherent emotional danger of building one’s whole life around a single person. It stars Ben Whishaw as Richard, a young man reeling from the recent death of his boyfriend, Kai (Andrew Leung). In a haze of grief, Richard visits Kai’s mother Junn (famed Chinese actress Cheng Pei Pei) at the drab retirement home where she was guiltily secreted by her son shortly before his death. Richard is met with a frosty reception; the isolated, non-English speaker Junn was heavily dependent on Kai for company and support, and is resentful of Richard for hogging her only son’s precious time. She is, however, apparently oblivious to the fact that Richard and Kai were an item. Borne of a desire to keep Kai’s memory alive through Junn and achieve a personal sense of closure, Richard resolves to forge a relationship with the resentful lady, and spots his opportunity when he discovers that she is dating an old English gent (Peter Bowles, amusingly dry). Ostensibly to oil the wheels of the elderly lovebirds’ relationship, Richard employs a friendly young British-Chinese woman named Vann (the lively, likeable Naomi Christie) to act as an interpreter. The ensuing narrative quietly makes hay from intricately exploiting the tense, cavernous spaces that emerge between what’s verbalised and what isn’t (how long, for example, can poor Richard keep his and Kai’s secret?) and between what’s intended and understood: thanks to the delicate, multilingual set-up, almost every exchange carries an unpredictable dramatic charge.

Lilting, the latest offering from Film London and BBC Films’ Microwave scheme for low-budget independent cinema (its budget: £120,000), began life as a play. Though it’s not difficult to imagine it being staged successfully, the material translates well to film, and even suits its low budget. The small cast and limited range of locations add to the overall aura of intimacy, while Khaou makes excellent use of cinema-specific techniques. He frequently employs searching close-ups and tight framing to accentuate characters’ isolation, highlighting the importance of their gestures and facial expressions. There are, for example, a number of finely wrought close-ups of Cheng, who gives a subtle, still performance of bruised stoicism, with flashes of irrepressible irritation. Junn’s backstory – she is a disillusioned Cambodian-Chinese immigrant unwilling and unable to acclimatise to new surroundings – constitutes one of the film’s most quietly moving threads.

Lilting also benefits from intelligent use of elliptical transitions, which often collapse temporal states without the need for an edit. Khaou’s biggest formal gamble is to periodically and unexpectedly insert disorienting sequences of

Kai interacting with either Richard or Junn; his scenes with Richard take the form of intimate flashbacks, while those with Junn have a more hallucinatory quality, made notable by Ula Pontikos's slightly impressionistic cinematography. It's a smart use of form to keenly evoke that strange, hard-to-communicate time in the aftermath of a bereavement, when the departed person remains a palpable presence despite their corporeal absence. One long take set in a greasy-spoon café morphs imperceptibly from a business-like discussion between Richard and Vann to another, more personal chat between Richard and Kai. Gradually it dawns on us why Richard has chosen to take Vann to this particular café: because memories of his relationship are rooted there.

Intriguingly, in play form, *Lilting* didn't feature a gay theme: the Richard character was the widower of a suddenly deceased woman. However, Khaou – who for a number of years worked as head of home entertainment at specialist UK LGBT distributor Peccadillo Pictures – made the change to add a further layer of dramatic intrigue. It works beautifully, and carries an added resonance given recent developments in the trajectory of LGBT cinema. In a recent article for the *Guardian*, the critic Ben Walters convincingly situated *Lilting* in a current trend of 'backward-looking' LGBT cinema that has emerged in a time of 'apparent legal equality, with less demand for big-screen expressions of cathartic angst or romantic wish-fulfilment'. This trend, continued Walters, includes 'small-scale, naturalistic, bittersweet' works characterised by 'present-mindedness and a willingness to explore grief, so often deferred through the years of struggle'.

In this respect, Khaou's film resembles Xavier Dolan's *Tom at the Farm* (2013), in which a closeted copywriter appears at the house of his late boyfriend's mother, who was oblivious to her son's sexuality. Instead of the roiling erotic tension and Chabrol-esque intrigue of the young Canadian's film, however, *Lilting* is a quieter, more reflective affair. Its gentle approach more keenly recalls Neil Hunter and Tom Hunsinger's sorely underrated, Essex-set *Lawless Heart* (2001), itself a character-led drama set directly in the aftermath of the death of a gay man's partner. *Lilting* also puts me strongly in mind of Michael Winterbottom's Chekhov-inspired masterpiece *Wonderland* (1999), with which it shares not an LGBT theme but a quiet naturalism and a strong sense of London – frequently depicted on film as a bustling metropolis – as a lonely, chilly place. Like *Wonderland*, *Lilting* largely excises London 'landmark' imagery from the frame. Instead, there are mere flashes of city iconography – a reflection of a red bus here, a rushing train there – all of which evoke a thematically apposite sense of transience and impermanence.

Though in most respects a remarkably confident and composed first feature, *Lilting* is not without its flaws. Leung gives a spirited turn in his limited screen time, but he is not (yet) in the same class as Whishaw, and the imbalance in the quality of their acting – particularly in crucial, intimate scenes – can be

striking. I was also a little sceptical about Khaou's decision to withhold the exact circumstances of Kai's death until such a late juncture in the story – the film has enough authentic, character-rooted drama for this lie of omission to come across as an unnecessarily manipulative leveraging of suspense.

The final word should be reserved for Whishaw, who gives an extraordinarily moving performance as the grieving man. The first time I saw him in action was nine years ago, when he played the small but memorable role of put-upon PA Pingu in *Nathan Barley*, Chris Morris and Charlie Brooker's scathing satire of clueless Shoreditch media types. *Barley* was a show of outsize comic performances and baroque cruelty – poor Pingu is electrocuted by his hipster-monster boss – but, amid all the madness, Whishaw communicated a bruised, tragic sadness that would have tonally unbalanced the show had he been on screen for any great length of time. With his limpid eyes, gentle voice and rangy yet fragile physicality, Whishaw brings the same heartbreaking qualities to *Litling*, and he's in almost every scene. His embodiment of grief is utterly convincing, and he gives an unselfish performance, vacillating fluidly between compassion, petulance and tenacity, all the while seeming so vulnerable that he could shatter into a million pieces at any moment. One lump-in-the-throat reaction shot of Richard, coming after Junn unexpectedly compliments his technique of using chopsticks to fry bacon – a technique obviously taught to him by Kai – might be the most quietly devastating piece of acting I've seen all year.

Ashley Clark, *Sight & Sound*, September 2014

Taarof: A Verbal Dance

Taarof: A Verbal Dance tells the story of Nazanin, a young Iranian woman who was born and raised in England. The film opens on the funeral of her estranged father whom we soon realise she lost touch with prior to his death. Not only does she have to face the death of a loved one she lost touch with but she also has to face an army of estranged relatives and a culture that she once knew very well.

Taarof tells the story of loss, of being an outsider even within your own culture, of finding one's own identity and of living one's truth. It aims to show that there is no correct way to grieve, no matter what cultural expectations we may have put on us by those around us.

taarofshortfilm.com

LILTING

Directed by: Hong Khaou
Production Companies: Lilting Productions, Microwave
Presented by: Film London
In Association with: BBC Films, Stink, Sums Film & Media
With Funding from: The National Lottery, BFI
Produced by: Dominic Buchanan
For Film London: Head of Production and Talent Development: Maggie Ellis
Creative Producer (Microwave): Mia Bays
Business and Finance Producer (Microwave): Mike Kelly
Development and Production Officer: Tessa Inkelaar
Talent Development Manager: Kevin Dolan
Stills Photographer: James Dewar
For BBC Films: Executive Producer: Steve Jenkins
Marketing Executive: Jacqui Barr
For Stink: Executive Producers: Robert Herman, Daniel Bergmann
For Sums: Executive Producers: Andy Brunskill, Robert Benton, Simon Flamenk
Line Producer: Donna Mabey
Production Manager: Hazel Falck
Production Accountant: Lynne Samuelson
Location Managers: Lex Donovan, Ross Monaghan
Location Scouts: Owen Twort, Lorna Ford, Andy Ross
Picture Post Production by: LipSync Post
Post Producer: Aileen McIntosh
Production Assistant: Pascal Le Comte
Runners: Hayleigh Roberts, Ryan Delahunty
1st Assistant Director: Jon Midlane
2nd Assistant Director: Emlyn Pool
3rd Assistant Director: Jeannette Sutton
Script Supervisor: Zara Carnagie
Casting Director: Kharmel Cochrane
Written by: Hong Khaou
Director of Photography: Ula Pontikos
Gaffer: Bernie Rostoski
Best Boy: Paul Starkey
Grips: Frederico Lopez, Tom Pittman
Lighting Technicians: John Harris, Salvador Gomez-Lopez
Focus Puller: Karl Hui
D.I.T.: James Ian Gray
Clapper Loader: Anca Badita
Camera Trainee: Jonathan Tomlin
Stills Photographer: Stuart Hendry
Editor: Mark Towns
Assistant Editor: Philip Michael
Production Design: Miren Maranon
Art Director: Augusta Akerman
Art Department: Francesca Massariol, Freddy dos Santos, Evannia Paine
Set Dresser: Emily Jayne Armitage
Construction Manager: Michael Mulligan
Prop Buyer: Jerry Bland
Property Master: Nikola Wake
Painter: Ben Reynolds
Illustrator: Irene Fuga
Title Design: Christian Morhring, Frauke Stegmann
Costume Designer: Camille Benda
Costume Supervisor: Laura Venables
Costume Standby: Frances Scott
Make-up and Hair Designer: Annette Field
Make-up and Hair Artist: Katie Lee
Head of DI: James Clarke

Senior Online Editor: Connan McStay
Colourists: Scott Goulding, Lee Clappison
Music Composed by: Stuart Earl
Music Supervision: Connie Farr, Thinksync Music
Dance Choreographer: Raymond Chai
Sound Recordist: Pete Cowasji
Boom Operator: David Turnbull
Supervising Sound Editor: Anna Bertmark
Executive Sound Editor: Joakim Sundström
Sound Re-Recording Mixer: Howard Bargroff
Assistant Sound Re-Recording Mixer: Matt Johns
Foley Artist: Ulf Olausson
Foley Recordist: Lotta Nilsson
Acting Coach: Giles Foreman
Mandarin Translator: Lillian Chia
Pinyin Translator: Jon Oiartzun
Film London Microwave Mentors:
Producer Mentor: Ken Marshall
Writer Mentor: Peter Ettegui
Director Mentor: Clio Barnard

Cast

Ben Wishaw (*Richard*)
Cheng Pei Pei (*Junn*)
Andrew Leung (*Kai*)
Morven Christie (*Margaret*)
Naomi Christie (*Vann*)
Peter Bowles (*Alan*)

UK 2013

86 mins

TAAROF: A VERBAL DANCE

Writer and Director: Alannah Olivia
Executive Producer/Co-creator: Roxy Faridany
Executive Producer/Head of Hair and Make-up: Lizzie Georgiu
Producer: Melinda Kaur
Casting: Emma Compton
Story Editor: Kathleen Beedles
Cinematography: Jaime Ackroyd
Editor/Co-producer: Emma McCleave
Production Design: Graham Robinson
Art Direction: Katerina Michail
Sound Recordist: David Bekkevold
Boom Operator: Maciej Londo
Cast:
Roxy Faridany (*Nazanin*)
Souad Faress (*Alborz*)
Fatima Adoum (*Shirin*)
Fisun Burgess (*Shadi*)
Nalân Burgess (*Banu*)
Glnaz Maleki (*Elaheh*)
Dae Dash (*Omid*)
Ishpriya Bird (*young Nazanin*)
Lara Alpay (*young Banu*)
Arash Nouri (*prayer man*)

UK 2018

17 mins

T A P E PRESENTS: BUT WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?

Lilting Sat 24 Jul 17:20; Fri 30 Jul 20:40

Head-On (Gegen die Wand) Tue 27 Jul 20:40

Shoot the Messenger + Q&A with director Ngozi Onwurah,
hosted by T A P E's Angela Moneke Thu 29 Jul 17:45

Culture Shock: Short Film Programme + Q&A with UNDR LNDN
Fri 30 Jul 17:40

What Will People Say (Hva vil folk si) Sat 31 Jul 17:30

T A P E was founded in 2015 as a response to the lack of representation on screen. Find out more about this curatorial collective at tapecollective.co.uk

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