



## NEW RELEASES

# Return to Seoul

### Return to Seoul (Retour à Séoul)

*Directed by:* Davy Chou  
*©:* Aurora Films, Vandertastic, Frakas Productions  
*Production Company:* Aurora Films, Vandertastic, Frakas Productions  
*Presented by:* Aurora Films  
*International Sales:* MK2 Films  
*Executive Producer Romania:* Diana Paroiu  
*Produced by:* Charlotte Vincent, Katia Khazak  
*Co-produced by:* Hanneke van der Tas, Cassandre Warnauts, Jean-Yves Roubin  
*Production Manager:* Rémi Veyrié  
*Production Manager South Korea:* K. Jonathan Park  
*Post-production Supervisor:* Lizette Nagy Patiño  
*Artistic Adviser:* Jeunghae Yim  
*1st Assistant Director:* Camille Fleury  
*Script Supervisor:* Marion Bernard  
*Script Supervisor (Romania Unit):* Pierre Cazeaux  
*CASTING DIRECTORS:* Joanna Grudzinska, Park Sun-ok  
*Screenplay:* Davy Chou  
*Freely inspired by the life of:* Laure Badufle  
*Dialogue Consultant:* Laure Badufle  
*Screenplay Consultant:* Violette Garcia  
*Director of Photography:* Thomas Favel  
*Special Effects:* Yannig Willmann  
*Editor:* Dounia Sichov  
*Production Designers:* Shin Bo-koung, Choi Chi-youl  
*Art Director:* Jin Hyun-jeong  
*Set Decorators:* Kang Dong-hun, Kim Soo-hyun, Kanitha Tith  
*Costumes:* Claire Dubien, Yi Choong-yun  
*Make-up and Hair:* Kim Ju-young, Pascale Guégan  
*Titles:* Fabien Fourcaud  
*Original Music:* Jérémie Arcache, Christophe Musset  
*Music Performed by:* Jérémie Arcache, Christophe Musset  
*Music Recording and Mixing:* Etienne Caylou  
*Sound Design:* Vincent Villa  
*Sound Recordist:* Dirk Bombey  
*Production Sound Mixer (Romania Unit):* Radu Nicolae  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Jung Yoon-heon  
*Piano Coach:* Vincent Mignault  
*Dialect Coach:* Lee Jin-bo  
*Cast:*  
Park Ji-min (*Freddie*)  
Oh Kwang-rok (*Korean father*)  
Guka Han (*Tena*)  
Kim Sun-young (*aunt*)  
Yoann Zimmer (*Maxime*)  
Louis Dominique de Lencquesaing (*André*)  
Hur Ouk-sook (*grandmother*)  
Son Seung-beom (*Dongwan, 'the francophone friend'*)  
Kim Dong-seok (*Jiwan, 'boy with fringe'*)  
Émeline Briffaud (*Lucie*)  
Lim Cheol-hyun (*Kay-Kay*)  
France-Germany-Belgium-South Korea-Cambodia-Romania-Qatar 2022©  
119 mins

A MUBI release

The screening on Fri 5 May 18:00 will feature a Q&A with director Davy Chou

'Loosely based upon the life of Laure Badufle', reads an intertitle in the credits of *Return to Seoul*. Laure Badufle is a friend of the film's director, Davy Chou, and an adoptee from South Korea raised by a French family. In 2011, Chou – who is French-Cambodian – accompanied Badufle to a meeting with her biological father, which she was nervous to attend alone and for which she required a French-Korean translator. The unexpected emotional intensity of what Chou witnessed – the meeting was, he told the *New York Times* earlier this year, 'sad, heavy, but also a bit funny – in the way a tragedy can be funny' – was the spark for this film.

Our adoptee becomes Freddie, played by Park Ji-min, a headstrong young woman who makes the impulsive decision to visit her country of birth when a planned trip to Japan is ruled out by a typhoon. A spontaneous friendship with hotel worker Tena (Guka Han), who speaks French, stirs in Freddie a desire to know more about her Korean roots – but also highlights how far away she is from them. Where Tena is timid and formal, and makes much of kindness and custom, Freddie is moody and outspoken, and gets a kick out of making people uncomfortable. These characteristics are presented not only as specific to these two women, but as expressive of the cultures in which they were raised. Can a young woman raised to value spontaneity, frankness and individualism find worth in a culture more inclined to prize reticence and the collective good? And can that culture find worth in her? Freddie charges on in, contacting the national adoption agency and having them contact her birth parents for her – but the route to any kind of resolution will be fraught. What, after all, does Freddie expect to find out about herself?

It's a question that goes straight to the heart of some very current cultural neuroses. The idea that behavioural tendencies affix to race or nationhood at all is unfashionable, associated as it is with historical notions of superiority and inferiority. Yet we also occupy an era singularly preoccupied with origins, heredity and the respectful acknowledgment of cultural sensitivities and differences. Anyone who has made their home far from their birthplace, or who simply travels a lot, knows that social and cultural differences are often neither subtle nor trivial – yet it still feels subversive to have (Korean) characters talk as openly as they do here about Freddie having a 'Korean face', let alone whether or not she has 'pure Korean traits'. Freddie's situation affirms the ineffable importance of knowing at least something of your own origins, but at the same time highlights the limitations of an identity politics based on authenticity or innate belonging. Is Freddie Korean because her genes are Korean, even though she neither remembers Korea nor relates to what Korean-ness seems to ask of her? Is she French because the only life she remembers is French? Does it matter?

Implicitly, and no less awkwardly, Freddie has also changed social class. She's affluent enough, we learn in passing, to have made regular recreational trips to Japan; she has the sophistication and brash self-assurance of moneyed youth. Her birth father (Oh Kwang-rok), whom she meets first, has had no such opportunities and evinces no such swagger. He is rural, shy, stricken with emotion upon encountering her, and a drunk. Freddie's extreme sullenness upon meeting him is certainly his belated punishment for rejecting her – but it may also contain an element of snobbery. These are her people, but they aren't her kind of people. A pair of pink shoes becomes poignantly emblematic of Freddie's father's need, and of her hostility. Desperate to please her, he buys them for her from a roadside vendor. She abandons them under a park bench.

That Freddie also drinks to excess is a possible example of a 'Korean trait' – the role of drinking in Korean culture is emphasised in the film – but also serves here as a reminder that there's not much point trying to find out who you are if you have trouble remembering where you've been. Perceptions of the role of alcohol in this film may vary according to the viewer's own relationship with it, but one interpretation is that the relationship Freddie really needs to sort out is the one she has with booze.

## NEW RELEASES

### Return to Seoul (Retour à Séoul)

From Fri 5 May

### Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power

From Fri 12 May

### Plan 75

From Fri 19 May

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It's a slight surprise when what seems like a small, localised story of self-exploration takes a temporal leap – five years into its own future, then a further three. But the shift in time reminds us that such a young woman is still evolving in terms of her own behaviour and self-presentation; that an identity crisis doesn't vanish overnight; and that it's no straightforward matter for a mother to reconcile with an adult child whom someone else has raised. Freddie does not become easier company, however, nor give more away about how she really feels – and that can get wearing. We continue to get rather too much of her being spectacularly selfish while gentler people fret in her wake. A development whereby an older Frenchman gets her involved in arms dealing is intellectually and morally interesting, but it feels unmoored because we know so little about Freddie's actual skills and interests, and risks being too blunt a metaphor for her moral disconnectedness.

The eventual encounter between Freddie and her birth mother, however, sweeps all awkwardness away. It is splendidly handled, with delicacy, openness and an awareness that there's simply no straightforward nor correct way for either woman to feel in this situation. Also wonderfully portrayed, throughout the film, is Freddie's relationship with her father's sister, played by Kim Sun-young. While Freddie sulks and her father self-flagellates, Freddie's aunt is indefatigably affectionate and touching in her efforts to understand Freddie's world. She embodies both the power of uncomplicated affection and the hope of change; in doing so she reminds us that cynicism and self-reliance are not necessarily the mature choices they can seem when you're very young. Learning that Freddie now deals in weapons, she asks with polite alarm, 'For war?' 'For peace – in theory,' Freddie responds. It is in that gap – between self-protection and exposure; between theory and reality – that this spirited, stimulating film finds its resonance.

Hannah McGill, *Sight and Sound*, May 2023

## Davy Chou on 'Return to Seoul'

At the outset, the film was going to just be lunch and dinner scenes, following Freddie over several years as she eats with her family. At that time, I was thinking of Hong Sangsoo. But I was conscious that if you're too influenced by Korean masters, you'll be derivative and it'll be boring. For the film's ellipses, I was inspired by *Moonlight* [2016], the only film I can think of that has this kind of structure. Maybe I was also thinking of *Toni Erdmann* [2016] a bit, in terms of structure, following a character who's not very easy to like at the beginning, and taking the time to unfold and connect with the audience.

As for the look of the film, I was thinking of two movies in particular: *Good Time* [2017] and *Uncut Gems* [2019] by the Safdie brothers. I was so impressed by their consistent capacity to film chaos. In *Return to Seoul*, as soon as Freddie feels pressurised or cornered, her immediate impulse is to break the boundaries and the frames, turn the tables, and create chaos to take back control. That dynamic between control and chaos is key to the character.

Another reference was Nadav Lapid's *Synonyms* [2019] – [I was struck by] how it reaches a Godardian freedom in form, and the way it can be seen as a kind of struggle or dance between camera and actor, or between story and character.

The second part of *Return to Seoul* is much more stylish, as Freddie finds herself safe and secure in Seoul's underground nightlife. We were thinking of very distant influences like David Fincher's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* [2011], [Hou Hsiao-hsien's] *Millennium Mambo* [2001], and even *The Matrix* [1999]. We had fun mixing such different reference points into the realism of *Return to Seoul*. It gets to the very DNA of the film: hybridity and a quest for identity, shaped with Asian, American and European influences.

Interview by Arjun Sajip, *Sight and Sound*, May 2023