



## NEW RELEASES

# Past Lives

### Past Lives

Directed by: Celine Song

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A Killer Films production

A 2AM production

Presented by: A24

In association with: CJ ENM

Executive Producers: Miky Lee, Hosung Kang,  
Jerry Kyoungboun Ko, Celine Song, Taylor Shung,  
Christine D'Souza Gelb

Produced by: David Hinojosa, Christine Vachon,  
Pamela Koffler

Written by: Celine Song

Director of Photography: Shabier Kirchner

Edited by: Keith Fraase

Production Designer: Grace Yun

Costume Designer: Katina Danabassis

Music by: Christopher Bear, Daniel Rossen

Cast:

Greta Lee (*Nora*)

Teo Yoo (*Hae Sung*)

John Magaro (*Arthur*)

Seung Ah Moon (*young Nora*)

Seung Min Yim (*young Hae Sung*)

Ji Hye Yoon (*Nora's mum*)

Won Young Choi (*Nora's dad*)

USA 2022©

106 mins

A StudioCanal release

This outstanding first feature by Celine Song is a beautiful, deeply romantic modern love story that embraces destiny, nostalgia and the immigrant experience. Na Young's family emigrated from Seoul to Canada when she was 12. She left behind and lost contact with her childhood best friend Hae Sung. A decade later, Na Young is now 'Nora', an aspiring New York playwright. She becomes curious as to the whereabouts of her playground sweetheart, so searches for him online, only to find him looking for her.

Song's profound romantic drama is an astonishing debut. Greta Lee and Teo Yoo bring nuance and sensitivity to their portrayal of Na Young and Hae Sung at different points in their lives, drawing out the subtleties of their internal selves. The relationship unfolds against a gorgeously shot backdrop, which is complemented by Daniel Rossen and Christopher Bear's (Grizzly Bear) elegant score. A divine cinematic experience, this is what we go to the movies for.

Kimberley Sheehan, Film and Events Programmer

In its plain matter-of-factness, *Past Lives* is an apt title for this poignant, slow-burn study of an enduring romance that both sneaks up on you and races ahead of expectations. The debut feature by playwright Celine Song, it follows roads taken and not taken by Korean-American urban sophisticate Nora (Greta Lee), who we first see across a crowded New York bar, sat between a white American (John Magaro) she's largely neglecting and a Korean man (Teo Yoo) who's getting almost all her attention. An anonymous stranger wonders in voiceover, 'Who do you think they are?' Another says, 'I have no idea.'

To find out, we're sent back to Seoul '24 years earlier', where two 12-year-old schoolkids are climbing a hill homeward. The girl, Na Young, is in tears because the boy, Hae Sung, has beaten her in a maths test for the first time. Ambition and stubbornness complicate their attachment, but severance is coming in any case. At home, Na Young's parents are playing Leonard Cohen's 'Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye', which intimates three things: first, it tells you the parents are artistic types; second, Cohen being Canadian underscores the news that the family are about to emigrate to Toronto – they ask Na Young to choose a new Western name and she opts for Nora – and third, the song's refrain presages the final scene of this sequence, where the two kids silently climb the same hill home for the last time.

A 12-year jump sees Hae Sung (clearly the Korean man from the opening scene, only younger) doing his military service, while Nora is an aspiring playwright in New York. Her efforts, aided by her mum, to find South Korean-appropriate dating prospects online lead her to stumble across an old Facebook inquiry from Hae Sung. Internet exchanges begin in intense curiosity. These are hardly ideal material for cinema, and yet the fluidity and assuredness with which they're handled, the way the film washes us through images and moods of contrasting lives, adds to the increasing sense of wonderment that we're watching a feature debut. Song, assisted no doubt by Keith Fraase's subtle editing and Shabier Kirchner's mood-perfect cinematography, shows astonishing control of the medium here, using the contrasts between Seoul and New York to heighten the separation between the two characters. Locations proliferate: Hae Sung wants to study Mandarin in Beijing to further his engineering career; Nora is off to Montauk for a writer's retreat. The

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## NEW RELEASES

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From Fri 1 Sep

### Past Lives

From Thu 7 Sep

### Love Life (Rabū raifu)

From Fri 15 Sep

### The Old Oak

From Fri 29 Sep

## KOJI FUKADA

### Hospitalité (Kantai)

Fri 1 Sep 18:20; Thu 14 Sep 20:40

### Au revoir l'été (Hotori no Sakuko)

Mon 4 Sep 20:35; Mon 2 Oct 17:55

### Harmonium (Fuchi ni Tatsu)

Wed 6 Sep 20:30; Sun 1 Oct 18:20

## RE-RELEASES

### Tokyo Story (Tōkyō monogatari)

From Fri 1 Sep

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distance and disparity between them begin to seem unbridgeable. 'You can't cry in New York,' says Nora, a true habituée of the Big Apple, as she decides the long-distance game is all too much for her.

The leap to the present (another 12 years) brings into focus the triangulation of the opening scene. Nora is now married to Arthur, the American, a fellow writer she met in Montauk, and they nurture the kind of Manhattanite relationship recognisable from Noah Baumbach or Woody Allen movies, albeit more nuanced than those comparisons would suggest. Meanwhile, Hae Sung has booked a trip to New York and asks if Nora will see him. As the full implications of his visit sink in for Nora and Arthur, the film morphs again into an unforeseen self-reflexive mode in which Arthur's view is central, but which I don't want to spoil here by relating.

*Past Lives* is a semi-autobiographical film that knows how to make its conventions seem fresh, partly because it's as much about how we project who we think we are as it is about reality. Is it sentimental? Yes, but with a certain tartness to the sweet things, a sense that being true to yourself can hurt more in an emigrant context. In a finely graded performance of terrific restraint, Lee embodies Nora's conflicting emotions as much with her eyes and her poise as with her dialogue. Yoo and Magaro are soulfully sympathetic in distinctly characterised ways. The film has such a breadth of understanding and sensitivity that if you were to ask me what I like most about it, I could only say 'everything': allusion, symbolism, clothing, simple things like fragments of noir iconography or a red light shimmering in a puddle – all are handled so deftly you never want the spell to break. The transition from making theatre to directing feature films has produced many casualties. Celine Song is not one of them. She's made the best feature debut I've seen in a long time.

Nick James, *Sight and Sound*, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk), 1 March 2023