

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON



PAST LIVES

(Language: Korean, Mandarin, French, English)

Director: Celine Song

UK Release: 2023

Running time: 105 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 18 September 2024

“This supremely confident feature debut from Korean-Canadian writer-director Celine Song is a spine-tingling gem – a tale of not-so-brief encounters between star-crossed souls, played out over a period of 24 years. Combining the aching yearning of Wong Kar-Wai’s *In the Mood for Love* with the casual intimacy of Richard Linklater’s *Before* trilogy, it paints a picture of unresolved affection as delicate as it is profound, interweaving timeless themes of fate and providence with more playfully down-to-earth musings on happenstance and shapeshifting identity. The result, which has one foot in South Korea and the other in North America, feels at times like an impossible mashup of Davy Chou’s *Return to Seoul* and Nora Ephron’s *Sleepless in Seattle*, shot through with a stoical melancholia that recalls the final scenes of Yasujiro Ozu’s *Tokyo Story*. Yes, really.

We open in a New York bar, where an unseen patron asks: “Who do you think they are to each other?” Cinematographer Shabier Kirchner’s 35mm camera gazes in long shot at a trio of customers – South Korean Hae Sung (Teo Yoo), Korean-Canadian migrant Nora (Greta Lee) and Jewish American Arthur (John Magaro) – and the faceless voice has “no idea” how they might be related, whether as siblings, colleagues or lovers.

From here we spiral back 24 years to Seoul, where schoolfriends Na Young (Nora’s original name) and Hae Sung have a competitive connection. “He’s manly,” she declares, “I’ll probably marry him.” But her artistic parents have other plans, emigrating to Toronto, thereby separating the prospective sweethearts.

Twelve years later, the pair are reunited virtually via Facebook and Skype, sharing glitchy conversations conducted at opposite ends of the day, on opposite sides of the world. He’s done his military service and is studying engineering, while she has become a playwright. Together, they talk about everything and nothing – the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*; how close they were as kids; how he would comfort her when she cried. Now in New York, she has stopped crying, partly because “nobody cared” and partly because she is no

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON**



longer the person she used to be, having reinvented herself in a different time, a different culture.

When the Korean concept of in-yun (a personal connection transcending lifetimes) is explicitly invoked and discussed, *Past Lives* seems set to become a traditional “made for each other” romance with a familiar love-triangle twist. Yet Song is more interested in exploring how people change than how they stay together – how identity is defined as much by where we are now as who we were then. It’s no accident that when the film’s title appears on screen, the two words “Past” and “Lives” are separated by a great space. Together, those words mean one thing; apart, they imply another.

A further leap of 12 years brings us back to that bar, revisiting the opening scene from a different perspective – or, more accurately, from three differing perspectives. “We were just babies then,” Nora tells Hae Sung in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge. “We’re not babies anymore.” Later, with a diasporic flair that is both humorous and heartbreaking, she notes that Hae Sung is “So Korean. I feel so not Korean when I’m with him. But also more Korean...”

There’s something quite breathtaking about the deceptive ease with which Song’s first cinematic foray juggles the metaphysical and the matter-of-fact, conjuring a world in which every decision has transformative power, and concepts of love and friendship are at once mysteriously malleable yet oddly inevitable. Song may have previously been best known as a playwright, but on this evidence, she has a glittering big-screen career ahead of her.

Plaudits to the principal cast, who do a miraculous job of portraying inner conflict and ecstasy with the merest tilt of a head, or subtle shift of a shoulder. Sublimely understated music by Christopher Bear and Daniel Rossen completes the perfect picture, pitched somewhere between the lyrical piano themes of Eiko Ishibashi’s *Drive My Car* soundtrack and the rapturous oddness of Jon Brion’s work on *Punch-Drunk Love*, filled with tentative discovery, magical possibility and (most importantly) the bittersweet pang of truth.

Mark Kermode, *Observer*, 10 September 2023

“In her debut film, *Past Lives*, which premiered at this year’s Sundance Film Festival, Celine Song tackles some big themes: the immigrant experience, intercultural marriage, and, above all, the nagging question of what happens to loves left unpursued.

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON



Told in brief scenes separated by grand sweeps of time, here is the plot: Nora (Greta Lee) and Hae Sung (Teo Yoo) are schoolmates who go on one “date”, supervised by their mothers, and spend it discussing Nora’s family’s imminent move to Canada. Asked why she’s emigrating, Nora says, “Because Koreans don’t win the Nobel prize for literature.” Twelve years pass. Nora – a student of dramatic writing in New York – sees that Hae has been looking for her via a Facebook page for one of her father’s films. They start talking over Skype, but she informs him she’s decided to focus on her life in the US as she leaves for a writer’s residency in Montauk. There, she falls in love with a Jewish-American man, Arthur (John Magaro).

Twelve more years pass. Hae visits New York, and, as Arthur – now Nora’s husband – predicts, he’s there to see her. She shows him the Statue of Liberty. They walk around Brooklyn Bridge Park, the carousel tinkling behind them. And, over drinks with her husband, they finally have a conversation about whether, in this lifetime, they were meant to be.

This conversation is in fact where the film begins. In its opening shot, voices out of frame are looking at the trio from across the bar, speculating on her relationship with “the Asian guy” and “the white guy”. Are the Asians a couple, the white guy a tour guide? Are the Asians siblings? Nora turns to camera, breaking the fourth wall. With a dramatic “24 years earlier” intertitle, we’re plunged into her childhood.

With this device, Song frames her film in terms of identity. Especially in affluent New York circles, the Asian-American woman and Jewish-American husband is certainly a cliché, and it’s bold to address it. Song draws our attention to unilluminated aspects of the immigrant experience – from the difficulties of typing in a non-Roman alphabet to the pressure on the immigrant to achieve enough to justify her sacrifice.

But *Past Lives* is naggingly unsatisfying: the characters are not fully realised, and nor is their story. The film anticipates an impact it doesn’t earn. Near the end, Arthur says: “I never thought I’d be a part of a thing like this.” I was wondered what exactly “a thing like this” was. Before meeting her husband, Nora had some video calls with a man she had briefly play-dated as a child. A decade later – two decades since they last had physical contact – he visits New York, and this brings up some feelings of loss, but not much else.

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON**



When all we see of Nora and Hae's relationship are some playground tumbles, Skype small talk and strolls around New York in which they repeat "Wow!" back and forth, it's hard to understand why it's so important to them. All three characters consider Nora brilliant, but we're given little insight into her work. Arthur never seems anything other than supportive and adoring (despite the gratuitous and distracting detail of his novel's title, *Boner*). The performances seem stilted because the cast are not given a lot to work with – Yoo least of all, despite Nora's aching attraction to him, which is the centrepiece of the movie.

Doing much of the work in the script is the Korean concept of "inyeon", which Nora explains to Arthur during their first drunken date. The concept, as she explains it, is the "Buddhist" idea that any people who come into contact with each other – even brush against one another in the street – have had a relationship in a past life. He asks her if she believes that; she says it's "just a thing Koreans say to seduce people"; and they fall into bed, in love. But does Nora believe it? When she and Hae finally speak about it, are they just flirting? In the end, we know very little about what's important to Nora, or if she's happy in her marriage – though, to Song's credit, we're left wanting more.

Song, like Nora, is a playwright with artist parents, who, having travelled from South Korea to Canada to the US, is married to a Jewish-American novelist. Her play *Endlings* tells the story of three older Korean women living in New York – the one snippet we see of Nora's work is a brief glimpse of a play about three older women. The material of *Past Lives* is clearly important to Song, and at times the movie is aching and poignant. At other times, however, one wonders if she has fallen into a trap of autobiographical art: not justifying why it should matter to someone else."

Ann Manov, *New Statesman*, 1 September 2023

"Nora (Greta Lee), the woman at the centre of *Past Lives*, Celine Song's vaguely autobiographical tale of scuppered romance, feels completely unknowable. It's what makes her so mesmerising. She's Korean-Canadian, having emigrated with her parents when she was 12, but now finds herself, 12 years later, in New York City pursuing a career as a playwright (she oversees an audition at one point, and the monologue being read is from Song's own 2020 play, *Endlings*). While reminiscing over the phone with her mother (Ji Hye Yoon), she decides to look up her childhood sweetheart on Facebook – the year is 2010, or so – only to discover that he's already attempted to make contact with her.

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON



Hae Sung (Teo Yoo) and Nora reconnect over Skype – again, it’s 2010 – and the ease of their conversation borders on the magical. They talk, talk, and talk, and hurtle towards a romance. Then, Nora unexpectedly shuts things down. “I want to commit to my life here,” she argues. Another 12 years pass in an instant, and when Hae Sung turns up in New York, he reunites with a Nora who’s now married (to Arthur, played by John Magaro) and a stranger to the young girl she used to be, when she was known as Na Young.

Past Lives isn’t quite the woozy, lovelorn drama that its trailers have sold, or that Christopher Bear and Daniel Rossen’s gentle score gestures towards. But it is an eloquent attempt to understand how our memories can end up turning other people into projection screens for our own, confused desires. Nora comes across as wistful, a constellation of possibilities. She’s a little frustrating, too – a person stuck on the precipice of a revelation. Lee was joyous in Netflix’s *Russian Doll*, but here she reins that energy in, concentrates it, and intensifies it.

Hae Sung, played by Yoo with sweet, wilted vulnerability, is an open book. He loves Nora, it’s obvious. And he’s so earnestly romantic, to the point of naiveté, that he’s almost unreal – a manic pixie dream boy representation of the life Nora left behind in Seoul. Does she actually love Hae Sung? The answer to that question eludes Nora, *Past Lives*, and the director herself, as Song’s script allows these strikingly mature and reasonable adults to work through some very difficult emotions.

There’s not a single shot or line here that isn’t deliberate. Nora and Hae Sung are largely kept separate from each other onscreen, in a film full of great, empty swathes of negative space. When Nora explains the Korean concept of “In-Yun”, in which people’s lives are fated to intersect, again and again, through cycles of life and reincarnation, she suggests that true love represents the culmination of 8,000 of those intersections. After that point, Song litters the background with romancing couples and random bodies who casually drift into and out of frame, propelled by their own stories.

Arthur, meanwhile, is never reduced to an obstacle; he understands what Hae Sung means to Nora, and never gets caught up in any ordinary jealousy. When he asks her if she’s happy with him, she deflects slightly. “This is where I’m supposed to be,” she insists. But Nora’s voice wavers, ever so slightly – how can anyone ever be certain they’re happy when there are so many different people they could have become?”

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON**



Clarisse Loughrey, *Independent*, 7 September 2023