

Friday, September 26th 2014

Lilting (15)

dir: Hong Khaou

starring: Ben Whishaw, Cheng Pei Pei, Andrew Leung,
Naomi Christie

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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.

The film is the latest offering from Film London and BBC Films' Microwave scheme for low-budget independent cinema (its budget: £120,000) and 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 businesslike 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 at a time of “apparent legal equality, with less demand for big-screen expressions of cathartic angst or romantic wish-fulfilment.” This trend, continues 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

Synopsis: London, present day. 30-something Richard goes to a retirement home to visit Junn, the elderly Cambodia-Chinese mother of his recently deceased boyfriend Kai. (Kai appears fleetingly throughout the film in scenes that sit somewhere between flashback and hallucination.) Junn speaks barely a word of English & has no idea her son was gay, let alone in a relationship with Richard, who carefully presents himself as a close friend. Junn is frosty towards him. She is dating fellow elderly care-home resident Alan, even though they don't share a common language. Richard persists in attempting to build a relationship with Junn and hires a young British-Chinese woman, Vann, to act as translator so as to aid the relationship between Junn and Alan. The tensions between Richard & Junn ease over a series of conversations moderated by Vann but flare up when Junn stops dating Alan, to Richard's chagrin.

Junn visits Richard & Kai's flat to collect some of her son's belongings. It emerges that Kai had been on his way to see Junn, with the intention of finally coming out and inviting her to live with them, when he was killed by a dangerous driver. Richard angrily criticises Junn for not trying to assimilate to English life: he explain how Kai felt pressured to look after her and how the decision to place her in a care home left him feeling terribly guilty. Richard tells her that Kai was gay and that the 2 of them were lovers. Junn seems to accept this and the film ends with a monologue from her about accepting aging and loneliness

Credits

Richard: Ben Whishaw
Junn: Cheng Pei Pei
Kai: Andrew Leung
Margaret: Morven Christie
Vann: Naomi Christie
Alan: Peter Bowles

Director: Hong Khaou
Screenplay: Hong Khaou
DoP: Ula Pontikos
Editor: Mark Towns
Music: Stuart Earl
Costume: Camille Benda

UK, 2013: 86 mins



Lincoln Film Society



Tom At The Farm (2013 – showing on March 20th this season), 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 us strongly in mind of Michael Winterbottom's Chekov-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 evokes a thematically apposite sense of transience and impermanence.

Though in most respects a remarkably composed and confident 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. Khaou's decision to withhold the exact circumstances of Kai's death until such a late juncture in the story, also feels odd – 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. He brings a heartbreaking quality to *Lilting* and he is 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 one of the most quietly devastating pieces of acting we'll see all year.

Ben Whishaw in 100 words

- born 1980
- has a twin brother
- trained at RADA
- **Film roles include:** Private James Deamis (first role – *The Trench* 1999, Tom (*My Brother Tom*, 2001 – BIFA award for Most Promising Newcomer), Sidney (*Layer Cake*, 2005), Keith Richards (*Stoned*, 2005), Sebastian Flyte (*Brideshead Revisited*, 2008), John Keats (*Bright Star*, 2009), Ariel (*The Tempest*, 2010), Q (*Skyfall*, 2012)
- **TV roles include:** Freddie Lyon (*The Hour*), Richard II (*Richard II of England*)
- **Theatre roles include:** Brother Jasper (*His Dark Materials*, 2003), Hamlet, (*Hamlet*, 2004), Konstantin (*The Seagull*, 2006), John (*Cock*, 2009), Oliver (*The Pride*, 2010)
- **Radio:** Jimmy Porter (*Look Back in Anger*, 2006)

Our next film: Friday October 3rd, 7.30pm. Blue Ruin (USA 2013: Cert 15)

An almost wordless opening sequence, in which all the key components of the story we are going to see are laid before us, marks the start of this terrific thriller from director/cinematographer Jeremy Saulnier. Dwight lives on his own in a rust-bucket of a car. Life appears to hold nothing good for him. When he receives news that something from his past has re-appeared, ghosts that he had hoped were long buried emerge, he is forced into actions that he barely believes he is capable of.

Visually arresting, impressively taut and enjoyably idiosyncratic, *Blue Ruin* is a gripping watch. Macon Blair as Dwight not only embodies the down-and-out that he is, but manages to engage our sympathies at the plight he finds himself in; while Saulnier marks himself out as a director with a strong voice that we will, with luck, be hearing a lot more of in future.