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Friday April 10th 2026

No Other Choice (15)

Dir: Park Chan-wook

with: Lee Byung-hun, Son Ye-jin, Woo Seung Kim

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Synopsis: Yoo Man-su, a veteran manager in the paper industry is unceremoniously fired after 25 years of service when his company is acquired by Americans. After a year of unsuccessful job hunting, Man-su is desperate to reclaim his middle-class life and provide for his wife, Mi-ri and their two children. Believing himself to be a "Pulp Man of the Year" specialist with no other options, Man-su devises a ruthless plan to eliminate his competition. Placing a fake job advertisement in a trade magazine to lure out top candidates in his field, he identifies the most qualified rivals and systematically begins plotting their murders.

Park Chan-wook's latest obsessional thriller takes its title from the line given to workers by the new owners of a paper factory for their mass layoffs: there was, you see, no alternative. Soon enough in *No Other Choice*, freshly fired Man-su (Lee Byung-hun) lurches into stalking and offing his competitors for the next available job opening. Park's comedic yet grisly version of the perennially familiar unemployment spiral adapts the 1997 novel *The Ax* by American crime writer Donald Westlake for another generation's rounds of merciless downsizing.

Before the badness, *No Other Choice* flourishes Man-su's picture-perfect life in the country, with a wife and two children he adores, two golden retrievers (with matching names), a lavish greenhouse, and blue skies and barbecues as far as the eye can see. Post-termination, Man-su gets a pitiful counselling session and takes a numbing warehouse job; he flubs a fresh job interview that a friend secures. So his practical wife Mi-ri (Son ye-jin) takes a job as a dentist's assistant and slashes the household budget – including the house, which is Man-su's remodelled childhood home. It's put up for sale, and even the dogs are shipped off with the grandparents.

So far, so reasonable, and even in this run-up, we're reminded of Park's alacrity in setting a movie into motion (quite literally, as he likes to cut into a scene with the camera or action already moving). But Man-su refuses to take "no other choice" for an answer, and the story hinges on his cocktail of deranging distress and pathological problem-solving. *No Other Choice* tilts into black comedy because all his deadly planning constantly teeters at the edge of disaster. What makes the outwardly normal Man-su a lost human being is that he dreads exposure and failure more than all the actual, you know, murdering.

Reeling in his victims by creating a bogus company and taking applications, Man-su bumbles through stakeouts and overtures. Two targets involve perverse set-pieces, typical of Park's wide-ranging,



eye-catchingly colourful flair for crime *guignol*. The demise of a rumpled paper-industry lifer (Lee Sung Min) who has a theatre actress wife (a madcap Yeom Hye Ran) ensnares Man-su in a grappling struggle in a living room while gratingly loud music deafens all of them. A more gruesome scheme involves staging the besotted victim's death-by-choked-vomit.

The levelheaded influence in the film is Mi-ri (Son Ye-jin, bringing a welcome dose of understated humour). She puts up with her husband's jealousy over her dentist boss, and goes all out to protect their son from an arrogant neighbour who's threatening charges over his cell-phone thievery (which in turns suggests the boy's absorbing his father's moral vacuum by osmosis). Meanwhile, their younger, cellist daughter becomes an enigmatic symbol, refusing to play in the family's earshot.

No Other Choice already looks to match the acclaim of *Decision to Leave*, with the bonus of a readily applicable story about *homo economicus* running amok. But that film entwined with its seductive plotting, whereas this one skitters along with an antic energy that, while goofily entertaining within scenes, doesn't hit quite the same groove. Man-su's loopy eagerness works against being truly drawn into his state of mind (not to mention his initial leap into killing), and whatever the downsides of his victims, it still feels a little awkward to laugh off their murders.

No doubt that's part of the film's thorny tragicomic premise, namely that Man-su is offing people who might have landed in similar dire straits, had the cards fallen a different way. The higher-ups directly responsible are a glancing presence personality-wise in contrast to the human foibles sketched out for Man-su's condemned targets, such as Go Sijo (Cha Seung Won), now a milquetoast shoe salesman who waxes poetic about the good old paper days. Suitably enough Park decorates the film's paper-world premise with analogue touches, including a soundtrack redolent of vinyl with its bit of bumping American soul and Korean ballads. A wartime gun from Man-su's veteran father plays a key role in both crime and cover-up (even suggesting secondhand valour).

In the end, the film's most persuasive point is that Man-su has simply mimicked the ruthless system that had disposed of him. His compulsive writing of notes-to-self on his palm underlines his directionless outside of context, and as he starts using the title phrase himself, it's less a cynical reference than a profound capitulation of self.

Credits

Man-su	Lee Byung-hun
Miri	Son Ye-jin
Si-one	Woo Seung Kim
Ri-one	So Yul Choi
Choi Seon-chool	Park Hee-soon
Bummo	Lee Sung-min
Ara	Yeom Hye-ran
Sijo	Cha Seung-won
Dong-ho	Im Tae-poong
Dong-ho's father	Kim Hyung-mook
Dong-ho's mother	Woo Jung-won
Miri's father	Oh Gwang-rok
Miri's mother	Lee Yong-nyeo
Detectives	Oh Dal-sou, Lee Seok-hyeong
Reporter	Yoon Ga-ri
Chin-ho	Yoo Yeong-seok
Grandmother on roof	Kim Hae-seok
Cello teacher	Joo In-young
Namgu	Nam Jin-bok
Tennis coach	Cho Eunjoo
Store manager	Lee Han-sol
Solar Paper workers	Hwang Kyu Chan, Bae Kiebum, Kim Jin-man, Kim Jeong-pal
Papyrus Paper CEO	Jin Chenggang
Papyrus Paper workers	Zhang Yung Shen, Son Sangkyu
Moon Paper	Yu Yeon Soo
Director	Park Chan-wook
Screenplay	Park Chan-wook, Lee Kyoung-mi, Don McKellar, Jahye Lee
Music	Cho Young-wuk
Cinematography	Kim Woo-hyung
Editing	Kim Ho-bin, Kim Sand-beom

South Korea 2025
139 mins

Take 2

In Donald Westlake's 1997 horror novel 'The Ax', a recently laid-off manager at a paper company decides to thin out the competition in the job pool by tracking down and taking out his potential competitors as he vies for a new job. Westlake's book was written amid the corporate redundancies of '90s America; it struck a chord with the Korean filmmaker Park Chan-wook, who has been slowly working out his version of the story ever since. It arrives now – as did Westlake's novel – in a society where the value of human labour has been decreed minimal, named for the refrain of almost every character in the film moments before they do something cruel and self-serving. *No Other Choice* sees Park at his most biting and brutal, but not without emotion. As bloodthirsty and impish as this work is, there's more to it than just rage against the machine.

Transporting the story to his native South Korea, Park casts Lee Byung-hun as family man Yoo Man-su, who lives in a gorgeous home with his wife, Miri (Son Ye-jin), their children, Si-one and Ri-one, and two beautiful golden retrievers (Si-two and Ri-two). Man-su is devastated after being laid off from his paper-company management role after 25 years, and despite assurances from his wife that he'll find a new job soon, 13 months later he's stacking boxes in a warehouse, desperately interviewing for a more senior position. After a series of calamities and with house foreclosure

pending, Man-su becomes truly desperate, and after becoming mildly obsessed with the cool middle manager at Moon Paper, realises the job market is simply too competitive. Wouldn't it be easier if he thinned out the pack?

Director Park's eye for expressive camerawork ensures a sense of dynamism and urgency that brings wit to the absurdity of Man-su's situation, whether it's a rig strapped to a dog or the comedic timing of a low-angle shot as our murderous middle manager considers dropping a heavy plant pot on a rival to take him out. One particularly lovely (and amusing!) detail is a minor one: Si-one has a matching raincoat with the family dogs. This attention to detail and precision in the film's visual schema creates a world where we understand the stakes, and although we might not share Man-su's antisocial intentions, they do make sense in a bizarre way.

That the handsome but often pathetic protagonist is such a compelling character is a credit to both Park and the wonderful Lee, whose performance is a masterclass in the tensions between comedy and tragedy. Moments of pathos brush up against entitlement and self-aggrandising, and while it would be easy to dismiss Man-su as a middle-class misery who refuses to do work he deems beneath him, Park puts effort into explaining why Man-su feels this way and how generations toiling under capitalism create self-serving individuals.

Even as the death roll of capitalism continues to clutch Hollywood in its jaws, *No Other Choice* proves that, in the hands of a master, there's still fertile ground to be found. His biting, incendiary dramedy calls into question how much we're willing to accept – and how far we're willing to go – in the name of preserving our own comfort.

Hannah Strong: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday April 24th, 7.15pm
Nouvelle Vague (France 2025) Cert 12a

Jean-Luc Godard—a prickly film critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma*—attempts to transition from writing about movies to making them. He rebels against traditional filmmaking "quality," choosing to shoot without a script, using natural light, and making up scenes on the fly which often causes chaos with the production. Using a narrow aspect ratio and with a humming jazz score, Richard Linklater creates a vivid evocation of the making of *À bout de souffle*, the film that launched the New Wave and transformed cinema.

Please note that the film will start at 7.15pm
and will be followed by the Society's AGM