



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 17 September 2021

Minari

US | 2020 | 112min | Cert 12A | Subtitles

Director: Lee Isaac Chung

Screenplay: Lee Isaac Chung

Starring: Yuh-jung Yoon, Yeri Han, Steven Yeun, Alan Kim



The review below by Peter Bradshaw, first appeared in *The Guardian* on 1 April 2021

Minari is an east Asian herb, sometimes called water dropwort or water celery, grown in the wild and treasured by connoisseurs, a little like samphire grass in England. Its appearance in this movie is a sign of something mysterious and providential, an indication of good things coming from the soil.

This is a wonderfully absorbing and moving family drama with a buttery, sunlit streak of sentimentality. Writer-director Lee Isaac Chung based it on his childhood growing up on a farm in Arkansas in the 1980s. *Minari* already has the look of a well-loved classic, whose every scene feels familiar and loved, and it has an amazing way of recreating childhood. Watching it, I remembered for the first time in decades what it was like as a kid to sit in the back of a hot, stationary car in those days before air-conditioning, waiting for your mum and dad with the sun beating down, maybe a wisp of wind through the open window, and the hot plastic seats sticking to your bare legs.

Steven Yeun gives a piercingly intelligent performance as Jacob, a Korean incomer to the United States in the Reagan era; he and his wife, Monica (Han Ye-ri), and their two kids, elder daughter Anne (Noel Cho) and little son David (Alan Kim), have arrived in Arkansas from California, where Jacob had been making a joyless but reliable factory wage in chicken hatcheries. Jacob has a big dream: he will farm the land here, and get rich growing real Korean vegetables for the many Korean immigrants in the US yearning for a taste of home. But Monica is already disappointed with this new, hard life he has given them. Han plays her brilliantly, as proud and self-contained as an exiled princess.

She has persuaded Jacob to let her mother come from Korea to live with them, ostensibly to help look after the children but also because Monica needs a real adult friend. Yoon Yuh-jung is marvellous as the cantankerous and outspoken “grandma” who has brought over creature comforts, including minari seeds, and Monica’s emotion

on seeing her mum for the first time in years is almost unbearable. Jacob gets on with the hard business of sowing and reaping, with the help of a devout Christian who has learning challenges called Paul (Will Patton), and has to ignore the faultlines in their marriage and worries about young David’s health. Inevitably, Jacob’s crops begin to fail, and we see him as his children see him: working backbreakingly hard and suppressing his panic about money.

Poor, tense Jacob achieves something like the status of Pa in *Little House on the Prairie* or Gérard Depardieu’s Jean de Florette, longing for the rain that will save his crops. It is agonising to watch him almost crippled with work and then arguing with Monica, and heart-rending to watch the kids rush to their rooms to write out “Don’t Fight” on paper planes and desperately throw them into the room where their parents are screaming at each other.

A critically acclaimed family drama about Korean immigrants in the US is being talked of as an Oscar contender after “*Parasite*” broke down barriers to non-English-language movies winning the highest-profile accolades.

Rightly or wrongly, this also is the sort of movie where you spend some time waiting for the first racist remark. When will it come? At the bank, with the white manager? In church, with the white minister? At the hospital, with the white doctor? But it never happens like that, or at least only in a single nasty remark from a white child to David at a church social. (The importance of Christianity in Korean life is another underdiscussed movie theme aired here.) Even then, the kid and David immediately become friends. This is not a film about racial tensions: it is as if this family is so isolated that the whole question is irrelevant. All that’s important is the family, and its titanic struggles with the weather, with fate and each other. It is a film in which the details, the child’s-eye-view episodes, the calamities, the tenderly remembered touches, all sing together like a choir.