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Sundance 2019 – The Farewell – Review

Online Screen Editor Jacob Heayes finds Lulu Wang's latest film a touching and elegant work.

5 mins read

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Could lying ever be an act of love? This is the question that pulsates at the core of Lulu Wang's stirring new dramedy *The Farewell*, a true story that presents itself as an 'actual lie', drawing from Wang's real family dilemma. Tackling ideas ranging from grief to clashing cultural ideologies with striking nuance, *The Farewell* is both an undeniable crowd-pleaser (winning Sundance London's Audience Award) and a beautifully complex

mediation on inter-familial relations that is sure to leave any viewer stunned.

Billi's (Awkwafina) grandmother has been diagnosed with terminal stage-four cancer. To her family's dismay, 'Nai Nai' is unlikely to live much longer than a few months, and with a wedding on the horizon, the perfect opportunity for her extended family to say their farewells has presented itself. One slight complication quickly bubbles to the surface however – Nai Nai has no idea she is about to die or even aware of the cancer growing inside her body. Thus, Wang swiftly sets the stage for a family reunion that's as comic as it is melancholic, with Billi struggling to understand an entrenched Chinese tradition of keeping one's gravely fate under lock and key. Raised in New York, Billi's arrival in China brings with it her own internal identity struggles, forced to re-acclimatise herself into a family and culture that's long since been buried in memory. It's a compelling rendition of the 'fish out of water' narrative, namely for how gracefully Wang navigates issues of diaspora and Western intervention within the framework of a contained domestic tale. The front of the wedding is nonetheless a clever excuse to comment on Eastern conflicts, with the Japanese bride Aiko often falling victim to mis-translation among the heated family quarrels. The culmination of these themes is genuinely insightful and original, with the film feeling decisive in its opinion on these clashes yet simultaneously respectful of all its eclectic cast of characters.

“Wang swiftly sets the stage for a family reunion that's as comic as it is melancholic”

The cast of *The Farewell*. Image courtesy of Sundance Institute.

It would be absolutely remiss to review *The Farewell* without spotlighting Awkwafina's poignant, joyously surprising lead performance. Music artists transitioning into acting is nothing new, yet her dramatic turn here is moving and honest, made arguably even more effective by her comparatively lighter turns in *Ocean's*

8 and *Crazy Rich Asians*. Awkwafina's own position as a Chinese-American working in the entertainment industry if anything enriches the film's diasporic commentary, building to a performance that is a shoe-in for

independent awards and fingers crossed, even greater awards recognition. Despite the obvious challenge of fictionalising Wang's family, the casting overall is fantastic and succeeds in how modest and effortless each individual performance feels on the screen. In fact, *The Farewell* on the whole is a film of modesty, captured in its gorgeous cinematography and depiction of Chinese and American landscapes. Rather than resorting to tourist-board filmmaking and centralising its locations around landmarks, *The Farewell's* director of photography Anna Franquesa Solano focuses her eye on bustling markets and rural communities. Each location expresses some form of significance to the family, enforcing the notion of personal attachment to a single point of geography, whether it's a familiar roundabout or a childhood home. Filmed on-location, Solano's cinematography is nothing short of immersive, wrapping audiences up into its warm environments.

With *The Farewell*, Lulu Wang and her team have created a film that is both moving and merry, a work of personal love that feels hand-crafted in its elegance and passion. Whilst film is no stranger to family narratives, *The Farewell* achieves originality and manages to resonate in its masterful blending of contemporary and atavistic qualities. Through tackling universal experiences with such grace, this is a film that deserves audiences feverishly rushing to their seats to soak in its beauty and treasure its heart.



4.5



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