

Film review

September 17, 2019

The Farewell

M *****

This engaging film is a charming blend of low key drama and gentle comedy. Inspired by personal experience, writer and director Lulu Wang confronts her central character Chinese-American Billi (Awkwafina) with a complex dilemma: her parents tell Billi that her beloved grandmother Nai Nai (Shuzhen Zhao) has only a few months to live. Yet her great-aunt, her parents and their siblings intend to withhold the prognosis from Nai Nai, believing that fear, not the cancer, would kill her. Although she questions the ethics of their decision, Billi reluctantly agrees to go along with the deception.



Nai Nai's sons and their families both live overseas: artist Haibin (Yongbo Jiang) lives in Japan. Billi's parents Haiyan (Tzi Ma) and Jian (Diana Lin) emigrated to America from Changchun when she was six years old. In order to gather Nai Nai's family together for what is really her farewell, Billi's cousin Hao Hao (Han Chen) and Aiko (Aoi Mizuhara), his girlfriend of only three months, have agreed to be married back in Changchun where Nai Nai lives. This will be Billi's first trip back to China.

As they descend upon Changchun, the various family members seem genuinely happy to catch up with one another, despite their underlying sadness over Nai Nai's illness. As they gradually relax into living their lie and simply being together, we see that like every family, individual members have differing views on just about everything. Much time is spent debating various topics over tables laden with food. At first Billi merely observes, but gradually she begins to contribute her opinions, often querying what others say. While these family discussions are rich in unintentional humour, they also allow Billi to re-acquaint herself with the Chinese part of her DNA, as does the precious time she spends alone with Nai Nai, talking or doing tai chi "to clear the toxins".

The whole trip provides a catalyst for Billi to reflect upon what relocating to another country has meant not only for her, but for her parents. Finally, she is able to speak about it with them.

Despite Haibin's assertion that Chinese and other Asians see themselves as family members, while Americans are self-centred, Billi notes various exceptions to the rule.

Blissfully unaware of her prognosis, matriarch Nai Nai's sweet face and soft grey curls belie her formidable personality. While she truly cares and worries about each and every member of her family, she is also quite controlling and demanding. Insisting that the wedding reflect her family's social status, Nai Nai organises an extravagant wedding banquet. While the bride and groom find it somewhat overwhelming, Billi is bemused by

the importance her relatives place on monetary wealth. Not surprisingly, the champagne unleashes torrents of hitherto sublimated emotions, making for moments both comic and poignant.

Scenes like this make Wang's film universally accessible. Whether we like to admit it or not, every family is dysfunctional in some way. Inter-generational differences, sibling rivalries, marital tensions all tend to surface no matter how hard everyone tries to be one big, happy family.

Before the various members of the family leave Changchung, they make a pilgrimage to the cemetery to pay their respects to Nai Nai's late husband. This allows Billi to finally say goodbye to her beloved grandfather. Here, as throughout the film, Yong Ok Lee's production design and Anna Franquesa Solano's camera show us a host of explicit details that embellish the narrative and inform Billi's thoughts as she processes what has defined her. The final exquisitely framed shot of Nai Nai waving goodbye is memorable.

Billi returns to New York much more comfortable about her identity. Awkwafina's understated portrayal of Billi, a character loosely based on Wang herself, is impressive and touching.

Alex Weston's beautiful cello and choral music perfectly underscores the pensive mood of the film.

Dora and the Lost City of Gold

PG ***

Inspired by the TV animation character Dora the Explorer, this film certainly entertained the young cinema audience with whom I viewed it. I sat with four of my grandchildren aged from almost three to almost seven years old. The "mild sense of threat" that earned the film a PG rating barely fazed them, least of all the youngest. He was enthralled by the talking animals, especially Boots the monkey and wily Swiper the fox (voiced by Danny Trejo and Benicio de Toro respectively). Damien Garvey's cameo as the school security guard also impressed him.

Like writers Tom Wheeler and Nicholas Stoller, director James Bobin clearly knows his target audience. The comedy is broad, the characterisations often more so. The kids especially enjoyed the antics of cowardly buffoon Alejandro (Eugenio Derbez).

The film opens with young Dora (Madelyn Miranda) living happily in the jungle with her explorer parents Elena (Eva Longoria) and Cole (Michael Pena). She is sad that her cousin Diego (Malachi Barton) has to return home to the city, but they (now played by Isabela Moner and Jeff Wahlberg) are reunited 10 years later when Dora is sent to live with Diego and his parents. Her father's cautionary demonstration of rave music is classic!

As he predicts, Dora finds the city scary and high school even more so. Contrary to Diego's advice, she stands up to mean Sammy (Madeleine Madden) and befriends nerdy Randy (Nicholas Coombe). When a highly improbable series of events finds all four teenagers back in the jungle, they have to work together to save themselves and Dora's parents, despite the many threats posed by villainous treasure-

hunting mercenaries and the guardians of the lost City of Gold.

My three grand-daughters were particularly impressed by Dora's knowledge of astronomy and geometry, pronouncing her "brilliant" and "so good at puzzles". They also noted Diego's knowledge of aqueducts. They loved the scatological humour, especially the Poo Song, while Miss Almost-Seven appreciated the hint of romance between Diego and Sammy.

Dora and the Lost City of Gold was filmed mainly in Queensland, so adults can amuse themselves playing spot the location/actor. It's fun.

Tricia Youlden is a retired teacher