API actors, actresses and directors shine at 2019 Sundance Film Festival

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Awkafina stars in *The Farewell*

"Based on an actual lie," proclaims The Farewell, the second feature from concert-pianist-turned filmmaker Lulu Wang, which was shown at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival in January. Inspired by her own family's dealing with her grandmother's diagnosis of advanced lung cancer, the film is an intimate exploration of love and loss in the face of cultural differences.

Rapper/actor Awkwafina, fresh off of a breakout year in 2018, stars as Billi, the struggling New York artist daughter of Chinese immigrant parents. (Like Wang, Billi's character was born in China, but has only vague but fond memories of her homeland on account of moving to the U.S. at a young age). Despite the distance, Billi shares a close relationship with her grandmother, affectionately called Nai Nai, who lives back in China. When Nai Nai's sister accompanies her to the doctor and receives the harsh news that Nai Nai doesn't have much longer to live, rather than tell the truth she decides to inform her sister that her lungs merely contain "benign shadows."

As a ruse to get the family to congregate and spend time with Nai Nai without her suspecting that it's because death could come for her at any given moment, Nai Nai's two sons orchestrate a wedding between Billi's cousin and his girlfriend of three months. Despite her misgivings about lying to Nai Nai, and her parents' protestations that she'll ruin the plan because she can't hide her emotions, Billi flies to China for the wedding. Like any family gathering, what ensues is a rollercoaster of joy, nostalgia, awkwardness, guilt and introspection.

As Billi, Awkwafina displays the same acerbic wit and comedic timing that endeared her to audiences in last year's *Ocean's 8* and *Crazy Rich Asians*, while simultaneously exposing the raw internal struggle of a daughter trying to reconcile her 'Western' ideals and convictions with her family's traditional attitude. As Billi insists that in the U.S., intentionally withholding Nai Nai's test results and diagnosis and lying to her would be illegal, her relatives and doctors assure her that, in China, it's quite normal.

Under Wang's script and elegant direction, The Farewell balances a sensitive, personal story with humor. Oftentimes, the most powerful moments in the film are the simple ones, when Billi and Nai Nai tease each other and the older woman dispenses advice, like when she hands her granddaughter a red envelope containing cash and says, "Don't spend it on rent -- buy something nice for yourself."

While the setting and circumstances may be unique to Chinese culture, the relationships between the family members and the dynamic of their interactions are entirely relatable. Billi's sense of being torn between her personal values and those of her family and culture will resonate not just with Asian Americans, but with anything-Americans who have ever felt at odds with traditional expectations and beliefs.

Regardless of how one feels about the morality of the family's decision to deceive Nai Nai, the significance of the wedding and the togetherness it entails is a reminder of how the love reciprocated by those we hold dear can sustain us in surprising ways. We may have little control over the end, but after a life well-lived what more can we ask for?



The cast of *The Farewell*. Awkwafina center.

Mindy Kaling writes and stars in feature film *Late Night*

Late Night, directed by Nisha Ganatra from a screenplay by Mindy Kaling, who also stars, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival held in January to wild cheers and applause. Featuring Emma Thompson as a talk show host struggling to revamp her long-running program as the head of the network threatens to cancel it, the film adroitly tackles the myriad issues women face in the workplace, from being the so-called diversity hire to slut-shaming.

Katherine Newbury (Thompson) is a comic whose career has garnered scores of Emmys and other awards, yet her show has been in a ratings slump for years. Enraged at the suggestion that she hates women, she orders her team to hire a woman to join the show's all-male writing staff. The resulting candidate is Molly (Kaling), whose comedic experience is limited to watching internet videos and whose television experience is nonexistent. Walking into the writer's room full of white, fratty man-children on her first day, Molly quickly realizes that keeping her spot at the table will be an uphill battle.

What she thought was her dream job proves otherwise when, aside from the fact that her colleagues seem to resent her very existence, Molly finds it difficult to mesh with the very caustic, very English and extremely narcissistic Katherine. Molly's earnest proposals for ways to improve the show grate against Katherine's ears, even though this very resistance to change is what contributed to the show's decline. With a strong supporting cast including John Lithgow, Amy Ryan, Hugh Dancy and Reid Scott, it's easy to get lost in Molly's journey from dreamer to doer.



Mindy Kaling in *Late Night*.

During a post-screening Q&A, Ganatra and Kaling jokingly described themselves as the only Indian-Americans women working in comedy. The sense of isolation that Molly experiences in the workplace and her determination to prove herself are all too relatable; while her male counterparts are able to get away with offering little to no utility, Molly must work twice as hard to even begin to be taken seriously. Even so, she doesn't let the other writers' initial hostility get her down. Stuck in a room full of WASPy, privileged men, Molly lets loose many quips that any self-respecting woman of color has fantasized about lobbing.

Similar to what Amy Schumer's 2015 film *Trainwreck* did in regard to dating and relationships, *Late Night* offers clarity in a playful yet pointed way as to what it's like being a working woman in today's society. Female viewers will feel empowered by Molly's refusal to let white male privilege take away from her capabilities and Katherine's self-deprecating jokes about age and gender. Male viewers, no matter how woke they may be, will hopefully gain more empathy. The struggle is very real, and we need to see more of it depicted onscreen.

Justin Chon's *Ms. Purple* explores themes of sacrifice

In Ms. Purple, director Justin Chon uses the seedy underbelly of LA's Koreatown as a backdrop for the delicate story of a ruptured family. Co-written by Chon and Chris Dinh, and featuring Tiffany Chu in a standout performance, the film which played at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival in Janary explores themes of sacrifice, loyalty, and the loss of innocence.

Kasie (Chu) is a young woman working K-Town's karaoke bars (donning heavy makeup, tight dresses and dangerously high heels and getting paid to entertain men in private booths in clubs) in order to cover her dying father's care. When the latest live-in nurse quits, Kasie is in a bind. Refusing to place her comatose father in hospice, Kasie reaches out to her estranged brother Carey (Teddy Lee) for help.

Periodic flashbacks reveal how the family of four became three, and then ultimately just Kasie and her father. The family's disintegration is a far cry from the American dream that Kasie's parents left Korea for, and their circumstances well below the stereotype of Asians as the model minority.

As Kasie, Chu lends a haunting, graceful presence, like the prima ballerina in a tragic ballet. Caught between her ailing father and the unfulfilling work that pays for his care, Kasie's life is as if on hold. A repeat client from the karaoke bar sometimes sees her outside of K-Town, paying a large sum to pretend to be a couple. For those several hours, she can almost forget the cycle she's trapped in, until reality sets in.

"You brought a doumi to a wedding?" scoffs a friend, using the Korean term for girls who work the karaoke bars. Kasie flees like Cinderella from the ball at midnight, but her patron is no Prince Charming.

Interwoven with Roger Suen's melancholy score, Ms. Purple recalls Barry Jenkins' 2016 Academy Award-winner Moonlight in its beautiful yet unflinching portrayal of desperation and its characters' drive to survive at all costs.

While the dialogue occasionally falls flat, thwarting certain scenes -- in particular exchanges between the two siblings -- from reaching their potential, the camerawork, editing and rich visual palette maintain the film's lyrical flow. A smattering of well-timed jump cuts provide painful reminders of the past; from Kasie as a child wearing a hanbok in preparation to see her mother to an adult stumbling down the street in the early hours of the morning in a similar outfit, or her and Carey, as kids, curled up side by side on the couch, and then later as adults.

It would be remiss not to mention Ms. Purple's strong sense of place, for the story could not take place in any other K-Town. Where else are there palm trees and such rich sunsets? Tonally, though, the film is less a love letter to Los Angeles than it is a suicide note.

Despite some occasional stumbles, *Ms. Purple* proves that Chon, also an actor, is a major talent to watch. ■