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Re-imagining the meaning of family



Joey (portrayed by Patrick Wang, left) and Cody (Trevor St. John) with their son Chip (Sebastian Brodziak) in a scene from the film 'In the Family.'

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE
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Inspiring film deserves an audience

I've been slowly moving through my list of the best movies of 2012 in this column, and the film you are least likely to have seen is perhaps the one I have most often recommended since I first saw it last year.

"In the Family" (#10 on my list) played in Portland for less than a week. First-time director Patrick Wang, who also wrote and stars in the movie, distributed the film himself and now has self-released it on home video. The lack of a distributor makes

me really sad because this careful film so deserves an audience.

Yes, it is nearly three hours long, and its deliberate pace has led several critics to categorize it in the genre of "slow cinema," characterized by long takes and a minimalist, observational tone, but you will be hard-pressed to find a film that is more carefully constructed, suspenseful and in its way, revolutionary.

The film's main character is Joey, an

Asian-American Tennessean grappling with the aftermath of his life partner Cody's death and embroiled in a fight for custody of Chip, the six-year-old boy they viewed as his son but the law doesn't.

But in a manner that befits this plain-spoken actor and director, Wang doesn't load the dice with dramatic speeches in which the characters discuss what they mean to each other. Instead, he depicts the lived-in intimacy of parents juggling pick-up times and carrying on dual conversations with their child and each other; of cordial relationships with co-workers who ask after Chip; and of the routines and buoyant chatter of a well-loved child. Wang understands the importance of everyday life in demonstrating what is true.

Joey's status as an outsider is subtly conveyed. We learn enough of his back-

ground to tell that he has been raised outside his birth culture and has spent time as a foster child. He is nearly always the only non-Caucasian in the room and is accustomed to breezing past others' doubts and discomfort with courtesy.

Though in flashback it appears that Cody's family accepted Joey and treated their relationship with respect, everything changes when Cody is hospitalized and then dies. We see how, in crisis, Cody's family closes ranks, and the hospital staff efficiently enforces appropriate norms. It's an important detail of Joey's experience, and one of many ways the film keeps things specific and complex.

Wang takes the time to deconstruct how it is that otherwise good people can

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