

# World Cultures Resonate at PIFF



There is still a full week to go in the Portland International Film Festival -- and some of the films that have already finished their screenings will appear in theaters soon. Here are some of what I've seen so far.



*Love and good teaching connect in 'Miss Kiet's Children,' one of the showcase films bringing fresh perspectives on world cultures at the Portland International Film Festival, continuing through March 1.*

"Miss Kiet's Children" has garnered a lot of comparisons to another wonderful film about a classroom where love and good teaching happen, the French film "To Be and To Have." Like that film, this one, set in a classroom in a small town in Holland, simply observes the transformation of the children in that setting. But this particular classroom, for reasons never explained, contains mostly children of asylum seekers from Syria and other parts of the Middle East. The patient and clear-eyed teacher, Kiet Engels, may or may not always understand why a student is crying or asking her to call her mother or has his head down on his desk. But she does provide loving attention and good pedagogy, about math and the Dutch language and also about kindness and good boundaries and self-respect, and she builds enough trust that sometimes we learn the little bits of truth that children can share that provide concrete hints of the trauma they all carry. The filmmakers wisely and simply just invite us to observe the transformations, big and small, that are possible in such a space—most movingly in brief, patient interactions with Engels, in little shifts toward kindness and self-control with their peers, and, especially, in physical movement exercises that are such telling evidence of what is happening in a child's heart. A final scene in which the movement happens on stage left me in a puddle, and restored my hope. It screens again

on Saturday, Feb. 24. "On the Beach At Night Alone" is recognizable as the work of Korean director Hong Sang-Soo. It veers toward angst, is low on plot, and doesn't necessarily present a chronological narrative; it also features Hong's frequent muse, actress Kim Min-Hee, with whom Korean tabloids had been reporting he was having an affair at the time this film was made. Upon its release, the director, whose marriage was ending, confirmed that he and the actress are indeed in love--and the film is gutsy on both their parts in that light. What story it contains focuses on a young actress in the aftermath of an affair with a married film director. Kim is, as always, compelling in her quirky directness and, as usual, has choice words for those around her after a few drinks. There is also a scene with the character of the film director -- and the pain of each is evident, though not necessarily sympathetic. An interesting window into Korean culture with a compelling lead performance, it plays again on Wednesday, Feb. 21.

"Ice Mother" offers a rare opportunity to see a film centering on a woman in her 60s who is interesting and is undergoing a significant change in perspective. Hana lives alone in the Prague home she shared with her deceased husband, and appears to be devoting all her energy to maintaining his standard of living and indulging their two ungrateful grown sons. There really isn't any room for her to have opinions and interests -- and yet, after a chance meeting with Brona, an unpretentious and genial ice swimmer, she finds a drive for independence and a group of friends. Her sons don't find either her new friends or her activities up to their standards, yet the shift in Hana eventually requires a shift in them too. In many ways this is a slight film; the sons and their wives are a bit crudely drawn as characters, and the conflicts are consequently a tad underdeveloped. But Hana is the focal point here and, as played by Zuzana Krónarová, she feels refreshingly real.

There is a particularly strong crop of films directed by women. My favorite was "Tempestad" (meaning "storm"), a mournful exploration of the emotional journeys of two Mexican women who have suffered profound injustices at the hands of those in power. Each of them narrates her inner journey with surprising clarity, particularly Miriam, who was wrongly imprisoned for human trafficking in a jail controlled by

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# Black History Month

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