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'Ajoomma' - A feel-good movie from Singapore at the Orinda Theatre

By Sophie Braccini



Photo provided

spotless Singaporean apartment. Auntie is a big K-drama fan and she has booked an organized trip to Seoul with her son, a 3,000-mile voyage and a big first for her. When her son cancels and she cannot get a refund, she has to decide whether or not she will go alone. Along the way she will have to become more resourceful and self-reliant, and find in herself the resources to become a relevant and contributing member of society again.

In an interview to the Busan Film Festival where his movie opened last year, He Shuming said that his own mother and her obsession with K-drama was an inspiration for the movie he co-wrote with Kris Ong. He explained that he wanted to make it a Korean-Singaporean co-production because of the way Korean pop-culture is influencing all of Asia. "Korea is an exciting place for film-makers," he commented. Shuming believes that the people immerse themselves in the streaming series to escape to a life so distant from their own. The portrait he draws of Auntie is done in an impressionistic way, one small stroke after another. The character that lived mostly in her dreams and her past, slowly emerges as a person of character as she takes steps to resolve the unfortunate predicament she finds herself in during the trip.

All the characters in the film, the tour guide, the Korean guard who will help Ajoomma, are ordinary human beings who go just a little step beyond ordinary apathy and selfishness. Their small steps of courage or resilience will have an impact. Not earth shattering or even life-changing, but they reclaim the fullness of their humanity.

The movie is full of charming cute details, such as the day Ajoomma, coming from a tropical region of the world, sees snow for the first time. The way this is filmed has nothing to do with the hyper-romanticizing of snow falling in K-dramas, but it just adds charm in a delicate way that rings true.

It is interesting to note that the movie also touches upon the issue of same sex relationships, just as Singapore's parliament repealed S377A, at the end of 2022, the law which criminalized gay sex. Shuming explained that he did not want to give lessons or change society, but simply to humanize situations.

The movie showing in Orinda is a U.S. commercial premiere, thanks to the International Film Showcase, the local nonprofit that selects excellent foreign movies and partners with the Orinda Theatre to present them in Contra Costa County. The movie opens at the Orinda Theatre on May 19 and will play for at least one week; tickets at www.orindamovies.com/

The movie opening at the Orinda Theatre on May 19, "Ajoomma," is not a K-drama. Even though it is filmed mostly in South Korea, it is a Singaporean-Korean co-production directed by Singaporean director He Shuming. It has none of the sugar-coating, glamorous unrealism of a Korean TV series. All the better. This charming uplifting comedy is steeped into the life of a Singaporean middle-aged commoner, and it is more related to the Swedish film "A Man Called Uve" than to "Crash Landing on You."

Ajoomma is a Korean term given to a middle-aged woman or a relative from an older generation. According to Lingua Asia, it is not an offensive term when used for older married women, but it is not particularly respectful either and can be patronizing. Translated as "auntie," it is the name given to the main character. A woman widowed for three years, Auntie lives with a son who is trying hard to escape the confined life they live in their

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