

SAAFF 2024: 'The Harvest' explores a Hmong family's tension between tradition, modernity - International Examiner

Perry Meas

5 - 6 minutes



'The Harvest' plays at the Seattle Asian American Film Festival on February 24 at Northwest Film Forum • Courtesy

During the tumultuous harvest season in the deep Laotian mountain countryside, life begins anew. A Hmong mother, Youa, struggles to deliver her child. Amid her twisting agony, Cher, her husband, paces anxiously around their straw hut. In a moment that seems to cut across time, we're plucked away to mellow Californian shores in the present day.

The Harvest (2023), directed by Caylee So and written by Doua Moua, explores one immigrant Hmong family's tension between tradition and modernity, and the choices a son must make for himself and his family.

First-born son Thai, played by Moua, returns home to Long Beach, California. He's being summoned home after a long absence in San Francisco, working on his career as a tutor and writer. On the way, he reunites with his younger sister, Sue, before they make the final stop at home where their mother waits eagerly.

At home, Thai finds his father a lonesome and bitter man. Cher can't come to terms with his changing health — his kidneys are failing and the experience has left him without much to live for. He stubbornly refuses to take any medication and simultaneously chastises anyone who criticizes him.



A still from

‘The Harvest’ • Courtesy

An old portrait of him as a young, proud officer in the Royal Lao Army hangs high above in their living room. It’s an image he can’t escape as his own low self-esteem and self-loathing takes hold.

Thai uses the little time he has in Long Beach struggling to connect with Cher. We often get glimpses that there is more to Thai and Cher’s strained relationship than simply intergenerational trauma. But just as they start drawing closer, they drift further apart. To avoid suffocating amidst a tense home, he finds a temporary escape when stepping out to meet with old friends late at night for parties and drinks.

Now that he himself is becoming older, Thai faces a decision about how much he should get involved in family affairs. Youa struggles to keep the house together. Meanwhile, Cher’s impotent rage and helpless outbursts as his condition worsens only further alienates the family from one another. Thai is the only one left to pick up the broken pieces at the cost of his own wellbeing.

The film addresses the evolving dynamics between adult children and their aging immigrant parents. We see the struggle and synthesis between modernity, feudal tradition, and superstition. These tensions then intersect with widespread poverty among working class Hmong Americans, who also navigate an unequal and byzantine capitalist healthcare system.

The film also takes care to show compassion toward different dimensions and motivations of Youa and Cher, which many diaspora stories written by children of immigrants often overlook.



A still

from 'The Harvest' • Courtesy

However, there are moments where the dialogue feels somewhat stilted, mechanical, or preachy. This detracts from the film, such as when characters dip into basic platitudes about broken relationships or strained family life or about the tensions between Western values over Eastern values.

In one such scene, Sue struggles with her father's backwards, patriarchal Hmong values. Youa consoles her by affirming that as an American, Sue controls her own destiny, not her father. But considering the pressures put on working class Southeast Asian women in America today and the widespread right-wing attacks on reproductive rights, this platitude falls short of uplifting.

Moua's performance also felt very subdued, which well-reflects Thai's inner turmoil, but I feel there could have been more opportunities to expand on his character. Thai's character doesn't shift until toward a few key moments at the end of the story, which ultimately does feel satisfying.

Overall, the realism that permeates the whole story is a core strength. *The Harvest's* steady pace takes time to draw out all aspects of Thai's return home and allowed me to really sit and hold the weight of the struggles facing him. *The Harvest* asks the audience to consider the weight of everything bearing down on this Hmong family, where the promises of life in the United States are, for many Asian Americans, sometimes too good to be true.

'The Harvest' is playing at the Seattle Asian American Film Festival on Saturday, February 24 at Northwest Film Forum.



sg.news.yahoo.com