

Directors Zhao, Chung Reflect On *Nomadland*, *Minari*

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All this, continued Zhao, was done to be true to Bruder's book. "Jessica did an incredible job documenting and chronicling these lives," assessed Zhao

the audience to sleep. You need to capture transcendence, the real feeling of what it's like for people of that age existing on the road—how to be true to that and still have a story arc that will captivate an au-

crafted to reflect the spirit of those experiences, taking us on a unique empathetic journey of a family in search of its own American Dream.

It's a story in which each family member is heroic and resilient in his or her own way, all contributing to help the family survive and endure, shedding light on what really makes a home. Bringing this family to life is a brilliant ensemble cast in which parents Jacob and Monica are played, respectively, by Steven Yeun and Yeri Han, while their son David is portrayed by newcomer Alan S. Kim, daughter Anne by Noel Kate Cho, and grandma Soonja by South Korean acting legend Yuh-Jung Yoon. Also integral to the story is a neighbor, handyman and farm helper Paul, a devout Pentecostal who speaks in tongues but also through the universal language of kindness. He is portrayed by Will Patton.

Chung observed that another "family" key to the film consisted of the production and post artists who came together with a sense of purpose. Like the film's protagonists, each member of this production family contributed, he said, in heroic fashion within a limited budget and time. The film was produced by Plan B,

Milne, editor Harry Yoon, composer Emile Mosseri and production designer Yong Ok Lee. Mosseri, for instance, had worked with Oh on Plan B's acclaimed *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*.

Chung said he struck up an instant rapport with Milne, Mosseri, Lee and Yoon, feeling a creative kinship to each. In retrospect, he observed that the feeling of family among them helped them all better tell the story of the immigrant family in the film. For example, Chung said of editor Yoon, "I could tell from our first meeting how much of the script he had already digested and the details he understood. I had a trust in him to tell me about things that weren't working, what was working. When I came back from the shoot, a week later he told me he was going to show me a cut of the film. 'You will probably hate it. No director ever likes it,' he said. Once I saw it, I saw that Harry's instincts for the story and how to maneuver certain problem moments I had on set were so sophisticated. I could see we had a film there. I felt no sadness or depression. I had a good sleep after that. We had lots of conversations and had a good time working together. We had a good way of really talking things through and figuring



Frances McDormand in *Nomadland*

who too wanted to convey the ups and downs of a nomad existence that still, despite its share of melancholy, has its own life-affirming roots, with added inspiration coming from the desolate, beautiful plains, mountains and rivers of the Western U.S. *Nomadland* takes us to different worlds—these natural backdrops as well as inside people's heads and hearts, most notably Fern's inner self.

Filmed over four months on location in Arizona, Nevada, California, Nebraska and South Dakota, *Nomadland* takes us into communities where Fern's encounters at times show how we can make brief friendships that last within us for a lifetime, like her bond with Swankie who has terminal cancer yet feels fulfillment in life through nature. A touching memorial service that Swankie requested reflects that resonance.

Zhao said that among the prime challenges *Nomadland* posed to her as a filmmaker was creating the character of Fern, enabling McDormand to settle into "this real world with real people" in such a way that "we can naturally incorporate these interesting characters we run across without feeling forced."

Another major challenge came in Zhao's capacity as editor of *Nomadland*. She shared, "As an editor you have to figure out how to stay true to the sort of feeling of aimlessness that exists on the road, and at the same time not putting

dience."

Zhao said the experience of making *Nomadland* gave her a deeper appreciation of what people on the road go through on a daily basis. "We were filming for just four months but we find ourselves going to a place where you connect with people, then pack up and leave, and probably are never going to see them again. I was emotionally exhausted. The natural process of making the film helped us to heal as well. You may feel rootlessness but you also feel you're part of something that never ends."

Minari

Writer-director Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari* (A24) made a major splash at last year's Sundance Film Festival, winning both the Dramatic Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award in the dramatic category. An American production with dialogue mostly in Korean, *Minari* is deeply personal for Chung in that the story is inspired by memories of his childhood. We are introduced to a Korean-American family that moves to rural Arkansas, a father's dream to start a small farm there, the struggle of immigrants in a new land strange to them, and a boy's touching, tender and charmingly comic relationship with his loving, at times foul-mouthed grandmother who moves in to help. While not a factual representation of his own experiences, Chung's story was



Lee Isaac Chung (standing) directs on the set of *Minari*

the company in which Brad Pitt is a partner/EP. Chung credited Plan B producer Christina Oh with helping to assemble the production family behind *Minari*. "I had been doing more arthouse films and was looking to Christina to help navigate my pulling off this film," shared Chung. Oh brought in artisans for Chung to consider and whom he wound up embracing, including cinematographer Lachlan

out the story together. There is no movie without him."

A couple of challenges stand out for Chung when he looks back on *Minari* (which incidentally is named after a peppery Korean herb), starting when he was writing it on spec. "I was writing it in the dark, I wasn't sure if it would land anywhere. I'm writing about my family in a

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