

Lee Ji Won about KIDS ARE FINE

"When the fence is broken, kids can grow up"

Da-yi's mother is in the hospital. But why? Da-yi doesn't know, as his father didn't say, in fact, he doesn't say much at all. But when mom is transferred to another hospital, Da-yi is determined to go and visit her, even if he has to head out on a trip to an unknown destination, in the company of some new friends and classmates.

Korean children's films (like THE WORLD OF US, THE HOUSE OF US, BORI) often know how to tell a story with a deep tenderness and empathy. When combined with the theme of a young kid on a search for his dying mother, you might wonder if anyone can watch KIDS ARE FINE keeping the eyes dry.

Lee Ji Won: What else can you expect from a film about a farewell to beautiful moments and beloved people? Making people cry was never my main intention. In fact, I was probably the one who cried most.

Kids in films should not always look cute, but your main actor surely

does!

Ji Won: Lee Gyeong-hoon (playing Da-yi) can express his emotions in a very controlled way through his shiny eyes. Once he finds his concentration, he can immerse himself completely in his character, as if Da-yi had always existed somewhere inside him. He is a great actor, combining modesty and innocence.

The atmosphere among the kids seems very relaxed. When we see them playing, it feels like all their laughter was for real.

Ji Won: It was our most important task to make the young actors feel relaxed on set. Instead of having them acting out artificial emotions, I searched for kids that stood naturally close to their characters. I didn't share the script with them. Rather, I explained to them the background of every scene, and then they improvised. They didn't just mimic key lines, but truly deepened the emotions.

Only slowly do we come to understand the gravity of the situation...

Nobody dares to tell the boy that his mother is actually dying.

Ji Won: Adults think too easily that kids are too young to deal with reality. Children can independently reflect and judge for themselves. This is something I wanted to address in this film.

Hospitals in general don't look like exciting sceneries for films. But in this case, the hospital scenes are among the most exciting ones in the movie.

Ji Won: Scenes located in particular places – like the hospital and the school in KIDS ARE FINE – often ask for an extra layer of detail and realism. As for the hospital scenes, I thoroughly researched the cinematographic options, I've been watching hospital documentaries, and I included a few personal experiences. Hospitals are usually depicted as fearful places, but not in this movie! It is Da-yi's favourite place – the only place to meet his mum – and he is always eager to go there.



He even wonders if he should feel guilty about his mum's illness.

Ji Won: That is a heart-breaking part. This guilt is born from doubt: does mum feel sick because of me? Is she getting more sick because I visit her too often? It's the words of adults that have planted these seeds – often the wounds on a child's soul are caused by an adult's thoughtless remarks.

The most heart-breaking scenes might be the ones with the yellow flower, an image so very powerful.

Ji Won: The colour yellow stands for





the protection that Da-yi needs, just as much as his mother needs his love and protection. The yellow flower is the medium that connects them, planted in a pot, as this is a story about a child surrounded by fences. Those are constructed by adults to protect, and at the same time hold back the child. Only when the fence is broken, kids can grow up in their own way.

When parents' ambitions are passed on to their children, is it a child's duty to make their parents' dreams

come true?

Ji Won: Absolutely not! Children should have their own dreams, and adults should make the world a place where kids can dream as wide as possible. Korean parents often try to adjust their kids to the world's criteria; they focus on uniformity rather than on individuality.

What was your 'big project' as a child?

Ji Won: I lived halfway between the city and the countryside. I saw the tall buildings ahead of me, and the mountains and farms behind me. My mission wasn't as big as Da-yi's, but I remember packing my gear to go climbing those mountains, searching for insects to catch, like dragonflies and grasshoppers.

Another striking picture in your film is a pile of schoolbooks lying by the roadside.

Ji Won: There are two kinds of children; those who are lonely due to their parents lack of attention, like Da-yi, and those who are lonely due to their parents overprotection, like his classmate Jae-kyung. His parents all the time arrange private tutoring to secure his future; in Korea we call them 'round and round kids', caught in the infinite 'Home – School – Acad-



emy' cycle. The schoolbooks by the roadside reflect the reality of Jae-kyung's life. By making him join on this trip, I wanted to set him free from his burden, though only for a little while.

I was told KIDS ARE FINE is based on a series of web comics.

Ji Won: That is true. The elements of the story are mainly the same; Da-yi and his friends, a sick mother and a busy father. The webtoon shows Da-yi's life as a diary in simple black and white drawings, not complicated nor fancy. It doesn't explain much about situations or emotions, leaving it up to the readers to fill in the blanks with their own imagination.

I guess it wasn't easy to find a prop-

er ending to the story, which you solved by including a short animated clip.

Ji Won: I didn't want a sad ending, but neither should we pretend as if nothing happened. Da-yi's face in the end reflects my wish for him to live a full and happy life. Through the animated clip I'm hoping to transcend the idea of motherhood, using the example of a child and a tree taking care of each other. The animation refers to the original webtoon as a small tribute, a wink to the fans.

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Gert Hermans