Critique

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Silent Friend

After America dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945, the town as people knew it ceased to exist. It affected every living and non-living entity, except Ginkgo Biloba. The ancient tree, once common around the world, is found predominantly in East Asia, and can survive for over 1000 years. It is immune to diseases or pests, and watching the tree grow year after year, extending its countless branches into space while remaining rooted to earth is an overwhelming experience.

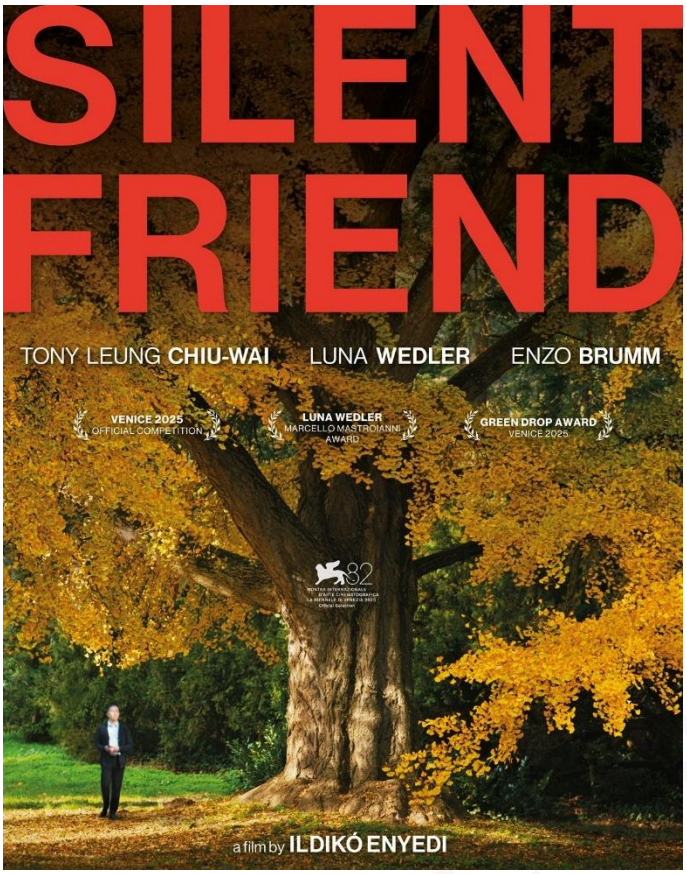
I haven't actually seen Ginkgo Biloba in person, but *Silent Friend* made me feel like I had. At the recently concluded Pune International Film Festival (PIFF), the film woven around this tree left an indelible mark on me. The director of *Silent Friend*, Hungary's Ildikó Enyedi, has been making films since 1989. Her first one, *My 20th Century*, won the Golden Camera Award at the Cannes Film Festival. Her 2017 film *On Body and Soul* won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, along with the FIPRESCI award. In 2021 release *The Story of My Wife* drew criticism from several reviewers.

I have been aware of her work, and admired it more often than not. But Silent Friend made me fall in love with director Ildikó Enyedi all over again.

This film unfolds across three different time periods. But the location doesn't change.

Marburg University, a prestigious German educational institute, was founded on July 1, 1527. It is well known for providing researchers the facilities to dig deep into natural sciences, medicine, humanities, and much more. Currently, over 20,000 students

have been using its resources at a vast campus, which blends the ancient and the modern. And countless trees. One of them is the Ginkgo Biloba. The tree in our film dates back to 1832, witness to nearly two centuries of the university's history.



Renowned neuroscientist from Hong Kong, Tony Leung, arrives at this university, and lockdown begins due to COVID. All the students have gone home, barring Tony and his colleague, who doesn't understand his language. Tony's research focuses on studying brain waves in children before they start speaking. But the lockdown stalls his research, and he is left with nothing to do in that huge campus.

One day, he stumbles upon an interview on TV of a French scientist named Alice, and what she says immediately catches his attention: "The world of trees and plants talks to us a lot. More than you can imagine. But we don't have the time to listen to this conversation."

Tony certainly doesn't have that problem. He has all the time in the world. He peers out of his lab window and sees the gigantic Ginkgo Biloba. He decides to research the waves of the tree.

"What if they observe us the same way we observe them?" he wonders and gets to work. Gradually, the two start bonding.

As the film progresses, we discover that Tony isn't the first to bond with Ginkgo Biloba on the university campus. Hans in 1972, and even before that, Grete in 1908, had connected with it.

Ginkgo Biloba is the central character in the film, with three stories woven around it — their *Silent Friend*. But these aren't stories in the conventional sense. They don't have a beginning, a middle, or an end. They aren't presented one after another. Nor are they intertwined with each other. The only common thread among them is the Marburg University.

Grete was the first female student of the university when she arrived here in 1908. That was the year the university had started accepting applications from girls. When she appears for the interview, the male professors are dismissive of her. Some are insulting, others are creepy. But Grete outsmarts them with her intelligence and calm, leaving them no option but to enrol her.

But even for capable and educated women, life wasn't simple in 1908. It still isn't in many parts of the world. The family hosting Grete throws her out, leaving her at a crossroads in life. Walking helplessly on the street, she comes across a sign outside a shop: Assistant Needed.

In order to pursue her studies, she needs a host. She walks into the shop, and meets an old photographer. She learns the play of light and shadow while helping her, and starts seeing trees, plants, and flowers in front of the camera with a different gaze. Botany being her subject, Grete's friendship with the trees in university grounds becomes an organic progression.

Hans on the other hand gets involved with the trees because he likes a girl who is interested in them. She is researching a geranium plant. "I would like to find a proof of what plants sense," she says.

She's planted this tiny sapling in her bedroom window. Through her, Hans gets drawn into the world of plants. She even asks him, "Aren't you bugged, here they are, sitting around in our midst, watching us, thinking all sorts of things about us."

Just like Tony in 2020. Hans naturally finds himself in the company of the Ginkgo Biloba on campus. When the girl goes away with her friends for a few days, he tends to her geranium. And he realizes how true her research is—that human existence, touch, and even moods are understood by plants.

We wander through these three different eras alongside the Ginkgo Biloba. Gazing at the sky visible through the tree's branches, one can't help but sense the neural connection. The director has precisely captured this complexity between the human brain and the tree's branches. Often, the grandeur of trees underscores human insignificance. Above all, time changes, the world around changes, but the Ginkgo Biloba remains constant.

This film is truly meant to be experienced, not narrated. How do you capture the bond between the tree and humans in words?

Director and writer, Ildikó Enyedi and her cinematographer Gergely Pálos have beautifully framed it on camera. Enyedi has added another layer to her filming. Grete's story is shot in 35mm black-and-white, Hans' youthful exuberance in 16 mm and Tony's isolation through modern digital lens.

As the film unfolded, it made me want to pause my life and spend some time chatting with the trees around me. You wonder why the thought of befriending them doesn't cross your mind while nursing your loneliness.

The film is intricate. It doesn't follow a standard plot. The drama lies in the relationship between humans and nature. It offers a unique perspective. It makes you look at the world around you differently.

The actors enrich the experience further. Tony Leung was unsurprisingly a standout. He's worked in seven films by acclaimed director Wong Kar-wai, delivering stellar performances. Be it *Chungking Express* (1994), *Happy Together* (1997), *In the Mood for Love* (2000), *2046* (2004), or The Grandmaster (2013)—this director-actor duo has given us masterpieces. In *Silent Friend*, Leung's presence is utterly natural and unhurried. Just as he bonds with the Ginkgo Biloba, he draws you in too — with the tree and his character.

Even if I hadn't watched any other film at PIFF, it would have still made my film festival. *Silent Friend* is utterly grand, perfectly embodying the tree it features.

Meena Karnik is a member of FIPRESCI.