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Korean indie movies for English speakers

By Claire Lee

State-run Indieplus offers English subtitles, English-language Q&A sessions with local filmmakers

Published : May 16, 2013 - 18:38

Updated : May 16, 2013 - 19:12



Indieplus, a state-run theater that screens local indie films with English subtitles. (Lee Sang-sub/The Korea Herald)

While there is much hype in the local media about hallyu, especially Korean films and their fame overseas, it would be difficult to claim that the local film industry is foreigner-friendly. Most local commercial films are screened without English subtitles in the country, not to mention subtitles in other foreign languages.

Located in posh Nonhyeon-dong in southern Seoul, the state-run theater Indieplus is one of the very few places in Seoul where non-Korean speakers can enjoy Korean movies

without having to worry about the language. The theater was founded in 2011 to support and screen local independent and arthouse movies, and most of their screenings come with English subtitles — which are appreciated by many foreign moviegoers here.

The fact that the theater is dedicated to indie films has a lot to do with the distribution system of indie films that makes the English-language subtitled screenings easier, says Huh Kyoung, the theater's programmer.

“Unlike commercial filmmakers, most indie film producers don't have a lot of money to promote their movies, so the best way to have their works known is to submit them to international film festivals before the local release,” she said in an interview with The Korea Herald on Wednesday.



Huh Kyoung, programmer at Indieplus, speaks during an interview with The Korea Herald. (Lee Sang-sub/The Korea Herald)

“And all of international film fests make it mandatory for the submitted works to have English subtitles. Once they win awards at the festivals, it's easy to market them in Korea and secure theaters for screenings. So most indie film distributors already have their English subtitles ready by the time their movies get released in local theaters.”

The first film the theater screened with English subtitles was director Kim Tae-il's documentary “No Name Stars,” a film about the aftermath of the 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement. The film's distributor suggested screening it with English subtitles at Indieplus, as a number of foreign film critics, who missed its screenings at film festivals, reportedly asked if there were any other ways to see it on the big screen with the English subs.

The screening with English subtitles continued with director Shin A-ga's grim family drama “Jesus Hospital” (Korean title “Mink Coat”). Its distributors also organized a Q&A session with director Shin accompanied by an English-Korean translator. Indieplus then decided to make English-subtitled screenings regular, at least once a week if not more. Hwang Hye-rim, a former reporter at weekly movie magazine Cine 21, is one of the translators for events at Indieplus, Huh said.

The attendance was rather poor in the beginning.

“I think the foreign audience is more honest and blunt about it when they don’t like what they see on the screen,” Huh said.

“I remember holding a screening that was going to be followed by a special Q&A with the director. Although the viewers had been informed about the Q&A session prior to the screening, 40 out of the 50 moviegoers just left when the credits started to roll.”

The talking sessions are now more popular than they were in 2011, said Huh. Earlier this month, the theater held a special discussion session after the screening of director Kim Hye-jung’s “The Girl Princes.”

A film about Women Gukgeuk, a type of Korean musical with an all-female cast popular during the 1950s, “The Girl Princes” features female actresses who enjoyed enormous popularity among young girls by playing male characters, mostly handsome male princes, for the shows. The session was attended by director Kim and Professor Todd Henry from UC San Diego, who has been paying much attention to Korean queer films since the late 1990s.

“It was a blast,” Huh said. “What’s interesting is that those discussion sessions somehow helped non-Korean viewers to form a community of their own. Some of them are teaching English here, while some of them are international students studying in Korea. It’s nice to see them become friends by coming here and watching movies together, though they came to Korea for different reasons.”

Huh said she has been trying to select films that offer glimpses into contemporary Korean society, as she has met a lot of expats who want to learn about the current affairs in the country. One of the films that received the most response from non-Korean viewers was last year’s documentary “Two Doors,” which reconstructed the 2009 “Yongsan Disaster,” a deadly police crackdown on squatters who opposed the redevelopment of the neighborhood — that left six dead, including one policeman.

“Many of the expats in Korea live in the Yongsan and Itaewon area,” she said. “And they knew ‘something’ had happened near their neighborhood when the Yongsan incident happened back in 2009. But many of them said they didn’t really get to learn about it. A lot of the expats who watched ‘Two Doors,’ a documentary about the tragedy, last year, said they were shocked to find out the details about the incident as well as the violence that was involved.”

Meanwhile, some local viewers have found English subtitles irritating, Huh said. “This does not usually happen for commercial films, but a lot of documentaries require Korean subtitles as you can’t always hear the interviewees’ voice too clearly. So the viewers have to see both Korean and English subtitles at once, and often they take up too much space on the screen. This can be annoying to some local viewers, I suppose.”

Huh’s two-year contract as the theater’s programmer recently ended. There has been speculation that Korea Film Council will privatize the theater soon. She said more research about their own projects and data archiving are necessary to make the theater better.

“For example, we haven’t been keeping a record of how much profit we actually made in those Q&A sessions assisted by an English-Korean translator,” Huh said. “We don’t exactly know how many of our viewers are from the southern Seoul area, and how many are from other areas of Seoul. KOFIC (Korea Film Council) really needs to start collecting these data to get more ideas on managing this theater better, whether they are to continue running it

on their own or privatize it.”

By Claire Lee
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Where to watch Korean films with English subtitles

Indieplus

3-5 Nonhyeon-dong, Gangnam-gu, Seoul (Near Exit No.1 on Sinsa subway station)

(02) 3447-0650

Indieplus is currently playing three indie films with English subtitles. One is Jeju-based director O Muel's "Jiseul," a tragic, poetic tale based on the 1948 Jeju Massacre. The other two are director Kim's "The Girl Princes," and director Lee Ji-seung's sex crime drama "Azooma."

For more information about the theater and its film-themed events, visit www.indieplus.or.kr

CGV Yongsan

6F, 1-Park Mall, 40-999 Hangangno 3-ga, Yongsan-gu, Seoul

(02) 1544-1122

Local multiplex CGV holds two English-subtitled screenings — one on Thursdays and the other on Sundays — at its Yongsan branch in Seoul. It selects one local film to screen with subtitles on an irregular basis; usually the film selection changes once a month or two.

The theater is currently screening director Song Hae-seong's latest, "Boomerang Family." Last month, they screened Kang Woo-seok's "Fist of Legend."

For more information, visit www.cgv.co.kr and click the English-language orange "Show Times" button at the top right of the page.

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Address : Huam-ro 4-gil 10, Yongsan-gu, Seoul, Korea
Online newspaper registration No : Seoul 0403711
Date of registration : 2015.04.28
Publisher, Editor : Kwon Chung-won
Juvenile Protection Manager : Shin Chang Hoon
Tel : 02.727.0114