

## FILMS

## In Sri Lanka and Sydney

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## WHEN MOTHER COMES HOME FOR CHRISTMAS/TWO FRIENDS

would rather not tell you about Josephine Perera. Her story being known to me only through the work of a gifted documentarian, Nilita Vachani, I would prefer that you get your information directly from the film, as soon as pigs learn to fly. The sad truth is, *When Mother Comes Home for Christmas* failed to win the affections of *The New York Times* when it was shown, just twice, in the recent New Directors/New Films series at the Museum of Modern Art. Never mind that the picture, made by a sometime associate of Mira Nair, is the product of extraordinary persistence, empathy and intelligence; never mind that it opens up the emotional lives of an entire family and reveals, in heartbreakingly direct fashion, the true meaning of the phrase "global economy." Without a favorable *Times* review in her pocket, Vachani is unlikely to attract a U.S. distributor for the film. That's why, with apologies, I now describe something you might never see.

*When Mother Comes Home for Christmas* opens with a pilgrimage, as round-faced, middle-aged Josephine Perera sails by ferry to a Catholic shrine set amid mountains and deep blue waters. There, after lighting a candle, she consigns her children to the care of a heavenly mother. We soon discover why. While her younger son, still a boy, is growing up in the dank confines of an orphanage in her native Sri Lanka, Josephine works as a domestic servant in Greece, cleaning a splendid modern house and caring for someone else's daughter.

A title card explains that female domestic labor is now Sri Lanka's number-

one export commodity, having overtaken tea. We get a quick, almost nostalgic, view of Sri Lankan women breaking their backs picking leaves. Then, in a sequence of brief scenes, we visit a government center, where Sri Lankan women learn to play their new economic role. Here is an electric machine that cleans floors and carpets; you push it like this. Here is a machine called a microwave, which heats food very quickly; you enter the cooking time with these buttons, then press "start." Here is a condom; you must use a fresh one every time you have sex and remove it promptly, or else the purpose is lost. We are left to imagine why this last course of instruction should be an official part of the job training. It's enough to know that Josephine, unlike the great majority of Sri Lankan servants, has secured a visa and work permit for the country where she resides. She's got that much of a grip on her rights—enough that she can even risk allowing Nilita Vachani to film her.

"Show your employers that you are working hard, and they will be very happy," advises the government training center. We see Josephine vigorously scrubbing mirrors and floors in Athens. We also see her employer, an itinerant Frenchwoman, hopping about at an aerobics class, with her exertions and Josephine's crosscut so blatantly that Eisenstein himself might blush. "I need a long rest," Josephine confesses in a voiceover, in a text from one of her letters home. A rest is more than she can hope for. But as we come to learn, the cross-cutting implies more than a dialectic of master and servant. It also invites us to consider in what sense Josephine might be like her employer. She, too, can claim a measure of autonomy as a working woman—as we see when Josephine returns to Sri Lanka and her family for the first time in eight years.

The airport in Colombo: Sri Lankan women are returning from their overseas labors, loaded down with goods. One woman carts in a refrigerator with her luggage; Josephine wheels along a washing machine.

The sight of it makes sense, somehow. She'd need a box that big to bring eight years' worth of feelings back to her children—a cardboard box, since nothing in their lives is going to be too fancy. Out of Colombo she goes, to her sister's place (a pop song on the soundtrack, government-produced, lauds the joys of working abroad as a servant); and there Josephine proves to be the boss. She has bought a bus for her older son, so he can run his own business. She is going to buy a house. Her daughter wants to marry, having chosen a young man with a perpetual grin and no prospects; Josephine is the one to negotiate the dowry and living arrangements. Her younger son, the one who ordinarily lives in the orphanage, needs straightening out; only Josephine can do it.

What must it be like, to cram your whole domestic life into just one month? And what if the need for cramming should demonstrate, in a perverse way, your success? As one of the lucky few who made money abroad and kept her dignity, Josephine gets to distribute the goods, make the decisions and preside over the emotional wreckage. The most remarkable thing about her is that in doing so, she so thoroughly transcends the categories of "victim" and "victor."

The most remarkable thing about *When Mother Comes Home for Christmas* is perhaps the way Nilita Vachani's camera stays with Josephine for the entire month in Sri Lanka, as if it were a fifth member of the family. I can think of few recent films that have offered such an intimate human drama while at the same time connecting the dots between rich and poor, First World and Third. *Hoop Dreams* comes to mind; but that was about a subject more glamorous than floor-scrubbing. No crowds will ever pump their arms for Josephine Perera. Still, she's every inch a champion. Watch for screenings at museums and film festivals—and keep an eye out for flying pigs.

Nilita Vachani may have trouble finding a distributor, but what of Jane Campion? *The Piano* brought her a level of recognition she had long deserved, including an Academy Award; and yet her first feature film, *Two Friends*, is only now being given a theatrical release. A sensation at the Cannes Festival in 1986, *Two Friends* enjoyed its movie-house debut on April 24 at New York's Film Forum.