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## When Mother Comes Home For Christmas (1996) FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW;Noble and Self-Sacrificing, A Long-Distance Mother

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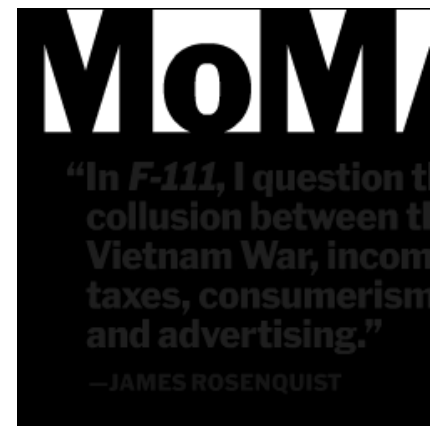
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By STEPHEN HOLDEN  
Published: March 30, 1996

If one were being facetious, Josephine Perera, the subject of Nilita Vachani's documentary film "When Mother Comes Home for Christmas," could be described as a Sri Lankan answer to Mildred Pierce. A widowed mother of three, who selflessly dedicates herself to making a better life for her ungrateful brood, Josephine is one of thousands of Sri Lankan women who have left their country to earn high salaries (by Sri Lankan standards) as domestics elsewhere.

The money they send home is so vital to the tottering economy that the Government gives instruction in modern housekeeping. The film visits a class in which aspiring domestics are taught everything from microwave cookery to the use of condoms.

The film begins in Athens, where Josephine works for an affluent Greek family with two young children. Almost every cent of the \$500 a month Josephine earns is sent home. As the movie shows, her salary goes a long way in Sri Lanka. Josephine has bought a touring bus for her eldest son and has kept her youngest son in boarding school. Although she regularly writes letters to her grown-up daughter, they are not answered.



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"When Mother Comes Home for Christmas" follows Josephine as she makes her first visit home in eight years and discovers to her chagrin that no amount of long-distance love and material help can assuage her children's bitterness. Her lonely, isolated daughter is rushing into a hasty marriage that will have no financial footing except what Josephine can provide. Her youngest son has been caught stealing and is earning poor grades at an austere boarding school that he hates. Although her bus-driver son seems to be making a go of it, it will be years before his vehicle will be paid off.

In the movie, which is being shown at the Museum of Modern of Art tomorrow and Monday at 6 P.M. as part of the New Directors/New Films series, Josephine emerges as a noble, self-sacrificing woman who hasn't lost her zest for life, although at moments she breaks into tears and wonders how long she can continue to be a workhorse. Adding to the pathos are her memories of a wretched marriage to an abusive husband.

"When Mother Comes Home for Christmas" presents an intriguing portrait of Sri Lankan society, but it is one of the cruder films in the New Directors series. Messily structured, with several unnecessary tangents and a voice narration than can be confusing, it offers a jumble of vignettes that never quite jell.

#### WHEN MOTHER COMES HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

Directed, produced and edited by Nilita Vachani; written in English and Sinhalese, with English subtitles; director of photography, Vangelis Kalambakas; music by Ross Daly. At the Roy and Niuta Titus Theater, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street, Manhattan, as part of the New Directors/New Films series of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art. Running time: 109 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Josephine Perera.

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