



MOVIES

# 'My Little One': Film Review | Filmart 2019

5:30 PM PDT 3/18/2019 by Clarence Tsui



©F Choffat, Intermezzo

'My Little One'

THE BOTTOM LINE

*Stunning imagery undermined by a sparse storyline.*



## into the Navajo lands in Arizona to understand the life of the woman they both loved.

Set in Arizona's windswept hinterlands, *My Little One* is a visually striking road movie driven along by its cast's taut performances, especially the fiery turn from first-time child actor Ruby Matenko. But this latest outing from Swiss-French directorial duo Frederic Choffat and Julie Gilbert ends up ringing as empty of meaning as the arid and sparse spaces they have strived to capture onscreen.

Revolving around two jaded, middle-aged men attempting to reconnect with the woman they loved and left behind a decade ago, the film's entrancing imagery can only barely obscure its lightweight narrative. When one of the characters comments that one should "never wait for something to happen" in life, she might as well be conveying what viewers might actually be thinking as they try to make sense of the motions and emotions unfolding before them on screen.

Featuring well-known French art house names such as Anna Mouglalis (*Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*, *Jealousy*) and Mathieu Demy (son of Jacques Demy and Agnes Varda, and an actor-director in his own right through films such as the Salma Hayek-starring *Americano*), *My Little One* has as yet to make a dent beyond its shores, having just unspooled in Switzerland late last month. The film made its market debut in Hong Kong's Filmart, and will probably interest buyers and programmers seeking for sun-drenched stranger-in-a-strange-land titles resembling Guillaume Nicloux's *Valley of Love*, the Gerard Depardieu-Isabelle Huppert family-ties drama from 2015.

Just like in Nicloux's film, *My Little One* begins with the reunion of a pair of estranged souls. After years apart, former close friends Bernardo (Demy) and Alex (Vincent Boniello) find themselves meeting up again in the desert deep in Navajo Nation as they answer a call for a reunion from Jade (Mouglalis), whom they last saw (and had amorous relations with) during a holiday in Mexico 10 years earlier. Those happier times are never shown on screen; what the viewer gets to see are how angst-ridden



Their simmering feud soars further as they reach Jade's trailer in the middle of the desert, where they get to meet her sharp-tongued young daughter Frida (Matenko). Priding herself as "half-Sioux, half-American and half-Swiss," the girl is a bundle of unbridled energy as she takes care of herself and her ailing mother; it's through her endless questioning that the men begin to revisit their painful past and address their inner demons. Jade, meanwhile, appears more like an apparition. Making a living as a singer known as "The Frenchie" in a casino in Vegas, she glides along as her sickly existence goes into terminal decline.

The men speculate about whether either of them is Frida's father, or what Jade wants them to do with the girl. The film never offers clear answers to these questions — but then again, Choffat and Gilbert hardly account for the motivations of their characters as they stumble along, their desires and anguish exploding either in the sun or during a sketchily shown menage-a-trois or obscure spiritual rituals at night.

Pietro Zuercher's camerawork does offer a spectacular look at the topography of the land. But the stunning landscapes and indigenous communities simply serve as a backdrop before which these lost and confused white characters unpack their personal traumas. The Navajo people — whose lines in their native tongues are not subtitled — invariably appear in the shape of a "medicine man," a supplier of strong hash, giggly girls in awe of the European men in their midst and mysterious musicians performing a ritual as Jade prepares for her own demise.

Seemingly harking back to psychedelic adventures of a past age — Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* comes to mind — *My Little One* could have injected more substance into its story and characters than the simplistic depictions of rage, anxiety and guilt in an exotic land.

*Production companies:* Intermezzo Films

*Cast:* Ruby Matenko, Anna Mouglalis, Mathieu Demy, Vincent Bonillo

*Directors:* Frédéric Choffat, Julie Gilbert

*Screenwriters:* Julie Gilbert, Frédéric Choffat, Jihane Chouaib



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*Costume designer: Anna Van Bree*

*Music: Yan Péchin, Kristoff K. Roll*

*Editing: Cécile Dubois*

*Sales: Wide*

*In English and French*

*101 minutes*

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