

Strand Releasing presents

SPA NIGHT

A FILM BY ANDREW AHN

Written and directed by Andrew Ahn

Starring Joe Seo, Haerry Kim and Youn Ho Cho

*Official Selection 2016
Sundance Film Festival
Seattle International Film Festival
BAMcinemaFest
Frameline Film Festival
Outfest Los Angeles*

PRELIMINARY PRESS NOTES

Country of Origin: USA
Format: DCP/Scope/Color
Sound Format: Dolby 5.1
Running Time: 97 minutes
Genre: Drama
Rating: Not Rated
In English and Korean with English Subtitles

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LOGLINE

Los Angeles' Korean spas serve as meeting place and bridge between past and future for generations of immigrant families; *Spa Night* explores one Korean-American family's dreams and realities as each struggles with the overlap of personal desire, disillusionment and sense of tradition.

SYNOPSIS

Andrew Ahn's remarkably assured debut feature is a portrait of forbidden sexual awakening set in the nocturnal world of spas and karaoke bars in Los Angeles' Koreatown. David Cho (Joe Seo, who won the Special Jury Award at Sundance for his breakthrough performance), a timid 18-year-old living with his financially-struggling immigrant parents, chances upon a secret spot for cruising when he takes a part-time job at an all-male spa, and begins to realize hidden inner desires that threaten his life as a dutiful son and student. Effervescent and atmospheric, this one-of-a-kind coming-of-age story makes the steamy spa a liminal place between dream and reality, and desire and disillusionment.

– *Metrograph*

Interview with Andrew Ahn

***Spa Night* is your directorial debut, and tells the story of a Korean-American family in Los Angeles. Is this story personal to you?**

Spa Night is an intensely personal film. I knew very early in the screenwriting process that I had to draw from my own life experiences in order to find the honesty I wanted to show on screen. As the son of Korean-American immigrants, I have felt the conflict between my parents' expectations and my own personal desires. In *Spa Night*, I wanted to explore what it means to be a part of a Korean-American family. As *Spa Night* progressed into production, the film became even more personal for me. We shot on location in Koreatown, Los Angeles -- at restaurants I have eaten at, spas I have visited, and streets I have walked down. As I directed scenes, I saw my family in this fictional family I had created. My main character David speaks in a mix of Korean and English to his parents, the same mix I use when I speak to my parents. With *Spa Night*, I want to open up American independent cinema to include stories about immigrant communities told in languages other than English. It is important that our cinema culture reflect the diversity of the American experience. By telling this story, I am attempting to validate the immigrant experience and acknowledge my parents' sacrifice to leave their home country and start a new life in America. *Spa Night* is my way of fulfilling my parents' hopes and dreams.

David is an only child and is very close to his family, a traditional married couple who want their son to experience academic success. Can you talk about how all three characters carry the emotional weight of the story?

Spa Night could have very easily been a standard coming-of-age story about a young gay man exploring his sexuality. I could have focused on just David's journey, as many films do. However, I quickly realized that *Spa Night* is more truthful and interesting as a family story. The tension of the film lies within the family. The reason David, Soyoung, and Jin struggle in this moment in their lives is because they value each other. David's fear of not living up to his parents' expectations is made worse by the fact that his parents believe in him. Soyoung's anguish over her husband's unraveling is made worse by the fact that they used to have so much hope for a good life. Jin's loss of purpose and drinking is made worse by the fact that he feels a responsibility to provide for his family. If these characters did not value family, they could simply ignore each other and pursue their own individual happiness. This type of conflict feels more truthful, complex, and heartbreaking. There is no villain in *Spa Night* -- just good people who care deeply for each other.

In *Spa Night*, the Korean spa is central to a majority of the plot. Can you talk about the meaning of the spa and how you developed that particular location in the film as character?

I have always associated Korean spas with my childhood, my family, and my Korean identity. As a child, I would go to the spa with my dad and we would scrub ourselves surrounded by old, naked Korean men. Then, we would go to the co-ed area and eat Korean shaved ice with my mom. It was a cultural ritual, a family tradition. A few years

ago, I discovered that some Korean spas in Los Angeles have been appropriated as a space for underground gay sex. A friend of mine told me over drinks in West Hollywood that he had a “hot hook-up” with a guy in a Korean spa. This discovery felt both sacrilegious and thrilling at the same time. It is very easy for me to separate my identities. I can either be Korean or gay. Now, there is this place where I have to deal with my identities at the same time. I am forced to be whole. For *Spa Night*, I wanted to give the spa a sense of fantasy. The Korean spa is an escape for David, a place where he can run away from his family and explore this other side of himself. We purposefully created a heightened portrayal of the spa through lighting, sound, and production design. I also wanted the space to feel mysterious, slippery. Moments can slide from cultural to erotic. The men in the spa float in and out like ghosts, as if they don’t exist in the real world. This quality allows David to feel safe exploring his sexuality; it feels separate from the world outside.

More than a family story, *Spa Night* has elements of a social drama. How did this story originate for you?

Spa Night began as a series of observations; I wrote a screenplay that took place entirely at the Korean spa, showing how different men use the facility. I visited spas and would just watch to see what characters and stories emerge naturally in that space. When I expanded the screenplay, I brought this process of observation to the greater Koreatown community. I never consciously set out to create a social drama, but my creative process definitely pushed the film in that direction. It was important to me that 21st century Koreatown Los Angeles never be just a setting for the film, but an active participant in the drama. The time and place influence and inform the characters’ journeys, situating them in a very specific world that lends them a sense of humanity.

You made this film with your classmates from CalArts. Can you talk about your cast and crew?

My producers Giulia Caruso and Ki Jin Kim (also my DP) are classmates of mine from the MFA Film Directing Program at CalArts. They are such great producers because they are also directors; they understand the other side of the relationship. I met Kelly Thomas and David Ariniello through Film Independent, where Kelly was their Producer in Residence. They not only understood and supported my artistic vision, they also had a clear idea for how to execute it, and an unwavering optimism that it would get done. Throughout the pre-production process, I surrounded myself with individuals who not only felt passionate about the project, but also challenged me. Editor Yannis Chalkiadakis and sound designer John Warrin pushed me to look at the film from different angles, giving me the opportunity to find the right solution, not just the easy one. Production designer Hyein Ki and costume designer Emily Moran brought the film to life, finding specificity and artistry in the world of *Spa Night*. Casting director Julia Kim took on the challenge of finding an entirely Korean-American cast who had the ability to take on such challenging material. The search was far and wide. Indeed, we flew in actors Haerry Kim and Youn Ho Cho from Korea to play the roles of Soyoung and Jin, David’s parents. Of course, the role of David was the most crucial to find the right actor. The casting process spanned over a year and involved traditional casting calls, street casting, and emailing Korean Instagram and Tumblr users. During one of our last casting sessions, Joe Seo

walked in and I knew we found our David. On screen, he embodies the “good son” so well because in real life, Joe is so open and guileless. He took on David’s struggle with such bravery; I knew he would give a strong performance because he respected and cared for the character completely.

ANDREW AHN BIOGRAPHY

Andrew Ahn is a Korean-American filmmaker born and raised in Los Angeles. His short film “Dol (First Birthday)” premiered at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival and has screened at numerous other festivals and venues around the world, including the Lincoln Center, REDCAT, and the Los Angeles Film Festival. The film received the Outfest Grand Jury Award for Outstanding Dramatic Short Film and the Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival Jury Award for Best Narrative Short.

Ahn participated in the Sundance Screenwriters Lab, the Film Independent Screenwriting Lab, and the Film Independent Directing Lab with his feature screenplay *Spa Night*. With his producing team, Ahn completed a successful Kickstarter campaign. The project also received a Sundance Institute Cinereach Feature Film Fellow grant, Panavision New Filmmaker grant, and EFILM/Film Independent finishing grant. Ahn is an alum of Film Independent’s Project Involve and has promoted diversity in the arts by mentoring youth filmmakers through programs like Pacific Arts Movement’s Reel Voices and Outfest’s OutSet. He graduated from Brown University and received an MFA in Film Directing from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).

2016 / **SPA NIGHT**

2011 / **DOL (First Birthday)** (short)

2010 / **ANDY** (short)

CAST BIOGRAPHIES:

JOE SEO

JOE SEO is a Korean-American actor working in the United States and South Korea. He grew up in Koreatown, Los Angeles, and began acting in high school. In the US, Seo’s credits include *Gridiron Gang* with Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, *Freedom Writers* with Oscar Award-winning actress Hillary Swank, *Out of the Shadows*, and *The Road to Hell*. Seo has also worked on several Korean productions, including the box office hit *Take Off (Gukga daepyo)*, directed by Yong-hwa Kim, and the TV show *Miracle Audition* on SBS. Seo received his bachelor in Anthropology from UCLA.

HAERRY KIM

HAERRY KIM is a South Korean actress who works in the US and Korea. Her US credits include: *West 32nd* (2007), *The Last Vacation* (2006) and *The Tin Soldier* (2009). In 2005, she guest starred in the series *Law & Order, Law & Order Special Victims Unit*, and *Hope & Faith*. Kim is a full-time lecturer at Kookmin University in Seoul and is a

founding member and the Artistic Director of Eye to Soul Theater Company (ETS). With ETS, Kim has created three full-length original plays: *FACE*, *Serve God: Sounds of Nightingales* and *Bathtub Play*. Her one-woman play *FACE* has been presented at the 2011 World Festival of National Theaters at the National Theater of Korea, HERE Arts Center (NY), the sixth soloNOVA Festival (NY), the Berkshire Fringe Festival (MA) and the 2010 Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland to critical acclaim. Kim received an MFA in acting from Columbia University.

YOUN HO CHO

YOUN HO CHO is a South Korean actor and lecturer. He is known for his critically acclaimed stage performances, including his lead roles in *Fall Fireflies* (2014) which received the Seoul Arts Center Award for Best Play, *Taklamakan* (2014, Best Actor, Two Character Play Festival) and *Parcel to Ireland* (2006, Best Actor, Keochang International Festival of Theatre). His recent screen appearances include numerous box office hits, including *Broken* (2014), *Dancing Queen* (2012), *White Night* (2009) and *Les Formidables* (2006) among others. Cho teaches theater production at Seoul University and serves as an evaluation committee member of the Korea Art and Culture Education Service. He holds an MA in Theatre from Hanyang University.

CREW BIOGRAPHIES:

DAVID ARINIELLO (PRODUCER)

DAVID ARINIELLO (Producer) is a filmmaker and cofounder of Extraordinary Renditions. He wrote and coproduced the feature *Arcadia Lost* starring Nick Nolte, Haley Bennett, and Carter Jenkins, which premiered at the Oldenburg Film Festival in Germany and went on to play festivals worldwide. He also produced “What Should We Watch?” starring Amy Landecker and cowrote and co-directed “The Incident” for the Lincoln Now project in association with *Vanity Fair* and Film Independent.

Winner of a 50th Annual Samuel Goldwyn Writing Award and an alumni of Film Independent’s Fast Track program, Ariniello is a member of the WGA, SAG, and IATSE. He holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of California at Irvine where he explored the relationship between work of the body and work of the mind in his dissertation on Joseph Conrad. Prior to that, Ariniello worked as a dolly grip before graduating from Columbia University in the City of New York.

GIULIA CARUSO (PRODUCER)

GIULIA CARUSO (Producer) is an LA-based Italian filmmaker and one of the founding members of the independent production company Nonetheless Productions. She produced the short film “Myrna the Monster,” directed by Ian Samuels, starring Kathleen Hanna and executive produced by MTV(other) - that after its premiere at Sundance 2015 went on to screen at several festivals worldwide, such as SXSW, LAFF, Palm Springs, and won the Grand Jury Award at the Oscar-qualifying Florida Film Festival. With Nonetheless Productions, Giulia has produced content for clients such as Intel, GoPro,

MTV, and is currently producing Ian Samuels's debut feature and a number of other projects for different platforms and formats.

Giulia is a Berlinale Talent Campus alum and 2016 Project:Involve producing fellow. She holds an MFA in Film Directing from the California Institute of the Arts, for which she was awarded the Hollywood Foreign Press Scholarship.

KI JIN KIM (CINEMATOGRAPHER/PRODUCER)

KI JIN KIM (Cinematographer, Producer) is a filmmaker, cinematographer and producer, working and living in Los Angeles. He moved from his native Korea to Los Angeles to attend the Film Directing Program at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), where he now teaches Film Production. Kim's films have screened internationally at numerous venues, including Sundance, Rotterdam, BAFICI, the Amiens, Tampere, SXSW and Slamdance, among others.

In 2012, Kim co-founded Nonetheless Productions, an independent production company dedicated to helping its talented collective of diverse directors in the production of motion picture content across a wide variety of media platforms. His work as producer includes the feature film *Aurora Notte* (BAFICI 2014) and the MTV Other short film "Myrna the Monster" (Sundance 2015). He is also a Sundance Producing Summit fellow with the narrative feature *Spa Night* (Sundance 2016).

KELLY THOMAS (PRODUCER)

KELLY THOMAS (Producer) is a co-founder of Extraordinary Renditions and VP of JuntoBox Films' Incubator Initiative. Previously, she was the Producer in Residence for Film Independent's Artist Development programs and in that capacity managed and curated labs for writers, directors, producers, and documentary filmmakers.

Thomas also produced branded entertainment for *Vanity Fair* and Lincoln Motors. She began her film career with Mockingbird Pictures and lectured on Media and Entertainment at the Darden School of Business at UVa. Thomas has worked with acclaimed directors Rodrigo Garcia, Phedon Papamichael, Robin Swicord, and Brad Silberling. She holds an MBA from the University of Virginia and a PhD in English from the University of Michigan.

CAST

David **JOE SEO**
Jin **YOUN HO CHO**
Soyoung **HAERRY KIM**
Eddie Baek **TAE SONG**
Peter **ERIC JEONG**
Stella **JANICE PAK**
Esther Kang **ANGIE KIM**
Grace **KAHYUN KIM**
Spa Manager **HO YOUNG CHUNG**
Mrs. Baek **LINDA HAN**
Boyish Mexican Man **ESTEBAN ANDRES CRUZ**
Mrs. Kim **SUN PARK**
Korean Counter Woman **CHRIS YEJIN**
Academy Director **YONG KIM**
Fit Man **DAVID PEVSNER**
Luis **JOSE A. SOLORIO**
Mrs. Im **KEIRA KIM**
Mr. Im **JONGWOON LIM**
Korean Businessman **JAMES S.W. LEE**
Mover #1 **TOM MACIAS**
Mover #2 **ANTHONY ARINIELLO**
Mr. Shim **IL AHN**
Korean Guy **TEDDY LEE**
Irate Korean Man **KI JIN KIM**
Middle Aged Korean Man #1 **DOYOUNG BAE**
Middle Aged Korean Man #2 **JIN KYU AHN**
Cop **DAVID ARINIELLO**
Young Korean Man **CHRISTOPHER PARK**

CREW

Written and Directed by
ANDREW AHN

Produced by
DAVID ARINIELLO
GIULIA CARUSO
KI JIN KIM
KELLY THOMAS

Executive Producers
IL & TERRY AHN
MATTIA BOGIANCHINO
BEATRICE CAMERANA
JAMES KUAN
MARCO MAZZONETTO

Associate Producers
JEFF CAPPS
JANE HWANG
RICK WEYRICH

Director of Photography
KI JIN KIM

Edited by
YANNIS CHALKIADAKIS

Production Designer
HYEIN KI

Sound Design by
JOHN WARRIN

Costume Designer
EMILY MORAN

Casting by
JULIA KIM