

Justin Chon Could Direct Himself and Alicia Vikander to an Oscar Nomination for the Timely ‘Blue Bayou’

By Clayton Davis ▾



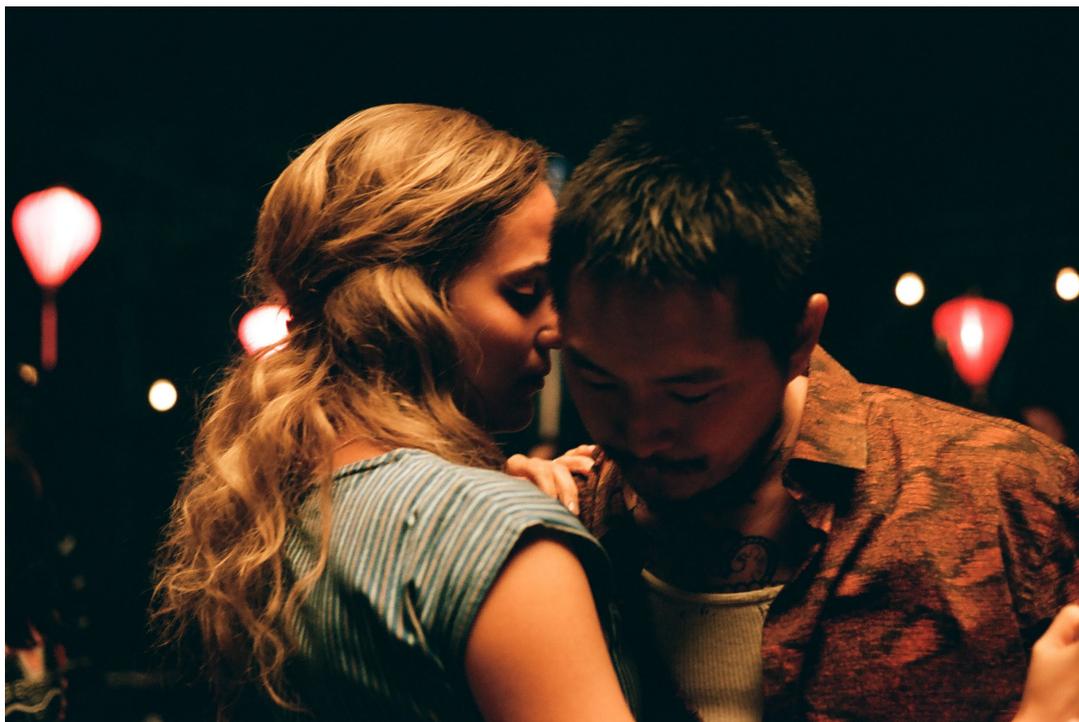
Courtesy of Focus Features

The lovechild of passion and talent, [Justin Chon's "Blue Bayou"](#) — a lyrical and emotional portrait of identity and family — is a piece that drums up lots of support within the film community, general audiences, and the Academy Awards in various branches. Leaving you in a puddle of tears by the end credits, the Cannes Film Festival selection could be a slam dunk for distributor [Focus Features](#) across all eligible categories, including best picture.

"Blue Bayou" tells the moving and timely story of Antonio LeBlanc (Chon), a Korean adoptee who is raised in a small town in the Louisiana bayou. There, he's married to his wife Kathy (played by Oscar-winner [Alicia Vikander](#)) and is a step-dad to her daughter Jessie (played by newcomer Sydney Kowalske). Struggling to make a better life for his family,

Timely is an understatement on how the story fits into our current climate and culture in America. Likely to do battle in the original screenplay field that could include former nominees and winners such as Aaron Sorkin and Wes Anderson, Chon, who might be best known for playing Eric in the "Twilight" franchise, humbly takes on the weight of his narrative message. It's not something the writer's branch is unfamiliar with. The spotlight that the film serves to a grotesque part of our American culture still prevalent today, with many at-risk without their knowledge, will be worth all the accolades. This may drum up considerable support from the actor's branch, which will do wonders for its talent in front of the camera. Is there a perfect narrative that's constructed? No, but when you are serving multiple aspects of a movie, with Chon's biggest directorial feature yet, some of the overdone beats tend to either slog or get in the way. So let me be clear, Hollywood would be wise to give Chon the keys to his next venture and see where he wants to take us for the ride.

Only eight filmmakers have been nominated for acting and directing for the same film – Orson Welles for “Citizen Kane” (1941), Sir Laurence Olivier for “Hamlet” (1948), Woody Allen for “Annie Hall” (1977), Warren Beatty, twice for “Heaven Can Wait” (1978) and “Reds” (1981), Kenneth Branagh for “Henry V” (1989), Kevin Costner for “Dances with Wolves” (1990), Roberto Benigni for “Life is Beautiful” (1998) and Clint Eastwood, twice for “Unforgiven” (1992) and “Million Dollar Baby” (2004). Chon is more than deserving and worthy of joining this elite list as Antonio is grounded but visibly affected by what’s around him.



Alicia Vikander (left) stars as “Kathy” and Justin Chon (right) stars as “Antonio” in BLUE BAYOU, a Focus Features release. Credit : Focus Features
Courtesy of Focus Features

This is easily Vikander’s strongest work since her 2015 Oscar-winning turn in Tom Hooper’s “The Danish Girl.” Slipping right into the film’s world, she could be one of the more accessible elements for awards groups to recognize. However, it’ll be interesting where she decides to campaign her achievement, as I see it as a clear and defining leading role. At the time of her Oscar win, the long argued debate surrounding category fraud was looking like it was gaining traction among awards enthusiasts. Vikander, along with Rooney Mara (“Carol”), were being called out for their leading roles going the “easy route” for supporting nominations. When you compare her work in “Blue Bayou” next to her co-star Linh Dan Pham, a remarkable actress who delivers an astounding turn as Parker, a woman who comes into Antonio’s life at a crucial time, you cannot compare the two characters in terms of screen time and impact on the narrative’s tale. Both are worthy, but will hopefully campaign appropriately.

Ante Cheng and Matthew Chuang's blue hues and Emmanuel Lubezki-like camera work should lead to consideration for cinematography. The same goes for the editing by Reynolds Barney and music by Roger Suen, who has worked with Chon on his features such as "Ms. Purple" and "Gook." The family that sticks together makes beautiful movies together, it seems.

There will be natural comparisons to last year's "Minari," which found recognition in multiple categories and won supporting actress for Yuh-Jung Youn. They're not unwarranted, but it's beyond AAPI aesthetics and themes. I found the throughline of many creative and acclaimed auteurs and artists sprinkled in parts, such as Barry Jenkins and Jim Sheridan. "In America" and "Moonlight" poke through the film in a very positive manner, and with a September release coming, I can see people really getting behind it; however, it's fair to say that the Cannes crowd wasn't across-the-board excited by the film's execution. Not just because Emory Cohen has a role in the film, but some parts hawk back to "The Place Beyond the Pines" by Derek Cianfrance, which was well-liked by many but found no support on the awards circuit. The key will be having multiple branches buy into what Chon is selling. Hopefully, a group like SAG will see the value and give it a leg up with an ensemble mention, which is one of its key strengths.

It's a long road to go, but "Blue Bayou" feels like the starting line firing in awards season. So let's see if it can stay in the race.

"Blue Bayou" is produced by Poppy Hanks, Charles D. King and Kim Roth. The film opens on Sept. 17 in theaters.