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Friday November 4th, 2016

Our Little Sister (PG)

dir: **Kore-eda Hirokazu**

Starring: **Ayase Haruka, Hirose Suzu**

Sponsor: **Paul and Helen Hancocks**

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Kore-eda Hirokazu's portraits of contemporary Japanese family life set-ups (albeit unorthodox ones) have drawn misleading if perhaps inevitable critical comparison with the home dramas of Ozu Yasujiro. The director has firmly rejected such comparisons, citing instead Mike Leigh as a somewhat unlikely kindred spirit. Still, while parallels with the bile and bite of Leigh's peculiarly British brand of exasperation and the clenched-teeth pressure-cooker environment of the family reunion portrayed in *Still Walking* (2008) are easy to detect, it is nonetheless the shadow of Ozu that looms largest over Hirokazu's latest work.

The setting for this superficially light tale about the three young women of the Koda family who take into their home their 14-year old half-sister Suzu whom they first meet at their estranged father's funeral, is Kamakura, the ancient capital that Ozu made his home from 1952 until his death in 1963, and where many of his finest post-war films were realised. The story unfolds at an unhurried pace, without overt conflict or sweeping narrative arcs, against the backdrop of the changing seasons of cherry blossom and summer rains; low camera angles abound in the interiors of the sisters traditional wooden home.

Seemingly inconsequential scenes of Bechdel-friendly sisterly solidarity initially invite readings that the film is little more than a quaint celebration of old school family values. Any domestic discord seems to be restricted to bickering as to who gets to use the bathtub first, or the disapproval of the emotionally guarded eldest sibling Sachi towards her less reserved sister Yoshino's drinking and reckless romantic dalliances. Suzu eases into her new life with few problems, adapting to her younger sister role over shared meals of homemade pickles or the mackerel served at the café that is the social focus of this coastal idyll town.

However the emotional memories evoked by such local produce take on a bittersweet taste, as subtle nuances within the dynamic of this ad hoc domestic unit emerge, shifting assumptions about the family's back story prior to Suzu's effective adoption. When Yoshino and Chika get their little sister drunk on the final remaining batch of *umsehu* plum wine made by their grandmother before her passing, the plums harvested from the tree planted some 55 years ago to mark the birth of their mother, it delicately draws attention to Suzu's outsider status within the maternal lineage. She has no blood ties to the family home, which on paper still belongs to the mother who, in the emotional aftermath of the breakup of her marriage some 15 years previously, left her daughters in the care of their grandmother and has remained largely missing



Synopsis: *Kamakura, Japan, present day. Sisters Sachi, Yoshino and Chika live together in the family home where they were raised by their maternal grandmother after their father left for another woman some 15 years previously and their mother departed shortly afterwards. Since their grandmother's death, Sachi has assumed the role of head of the household. Learning of their estranged father's death, the sisters travel to Yamagata for his funeral and meet Suzu, the 14-year old daughter from his second marriage. Sachi impetuously invites their newly discovered half-sister to live with them.*

Suzu moves in with the three sisters and starts at the local school, joining the soccer team and proving instantly popular. The sisters' great aunt visits Sachi and berates her for taking Suzu in without asking permission from their mother Miyako, now living in Hokkaido. Yoshino, who works at a local bank, gets drunk after breaking up with her boyfriend and squabbles with Sachi. Sachi, who is conducting a secret affair with a doctor at the hospital where she works, is promoted to the terminal care ward. Yoshino is also promoted at the bank. Yoshino discovers Ms Ninomiya, the owner of a small seafood restaurant that serves as the hub of the local community, might be forced to sell up due to debt. Sachi learns that Ms Ninomiya has cancer. Miyako returns for her mother's memorial service, having not communicated with her daughters for many years. She provokes an argument with Sachi by suggesting that they sell the family home. They resolve their differences and Miyako returns to Hokkaido. Ms Ninomiya dies, and the sisters gather with the local community for the funeral.

Credits

Ayase Haruka	Koda Sachi
Nagasawa Masami	Koda Yoshino
Kaho	Koda Chika
Hirose Suzu	Asaro Suzu
Kase Ryo	Sakashita
Maeda Ohshiro	Futa
Fubuki Jun	Ms Ninomiya
Otake Shinobu	Miyako
Director	Kore-eda Hirokazu
Written by	Kore-eda Hirokazu
DoP	Takimoto Mikiya
Editor	Kore-eda Hirokazu
Music	Kanno Yoko
Costume	Ito Sachiko

Japan 2015, 127 mins

from the picture ever since. Suzu later confides to Futa, her soulmate on her school's mixed soccer team, about her sense of awkwardness in sharing her half-sisters' memories of the father who abandoned them for her own mother when Sachi was the age she is now: her birth effectively came at the cost of their stable home life. When at one point she is offered the local speciality of whitebait on rice, she is too ashamed to admit that their father regularly cooked the same dish for her when she was growing up, a tradition carried over from his former home town.

Sachi has her own pangs of conscience. Her decision to accept a job at the terminal-care ward in the hospital where she works is, it's hinted, motivated by the filial guilt that it was Suzu who nursed their father through his final months of cancer. The absence of a father figure throughout her teenage years similarly appears to inform her clandestine affair with a doctor colleague, the exact nature of which becomes clearer as the film progresses. Yoshino too is looking for an emotional anchor. Chika, the former baby of the family before Suzu's discovery, seems the most balanced of the three, although consequently can't help but feel a little underwritten.

Adapted from Akimi Yoshida's manga *Umimachi Diary* ('Seaside Town Diary'), *Our Little Sister* explores concerns similar to those found in much of Kore-eda's work: the investigation into repressed, misplaced or shared memories of *After Life* (1998); the motifs of absent parents and restructuring families of *Mahorosi* (1995), *Nobody Knows* (2004) and *Like Father, Like Son* (2013). Adhering to the lighter, more conventional approach the director has settled into since his paean to childhood innocence *I Wish* (2011), the understated drama of his latest film might appear to lack the stylistic individualism and immediacy of the earlier works that established his international reputation. Nevertheless, Kore-eda's effortless ability subtly to accumulate layer upon layer of emotional detail through successive scenes of everyday life substantiates his status as the most probing and consistently interesting observer of Japanese family relationships of his generation. In this respect at least, comparisons to Ozu seem apt.

Another View

*Following the death of their absentee father, a trio of Japanese women – living together at the home they inherited from their grandmother – decide to take in the teenage half-sister they never knew they had. Abandoned by their mother at an early age, eldest Sachi (Haruka Ayase), middle child Yoshino (Masami Nagasawa) and the still youthful and jubilant Chika (Kaho) take the young Suzu (Suzu Hirose) under their wing the best they can while continuing to struggle with adult issues of their own. Based on the serialized manga Umimachi Diary by Akimi Yoshida, **Our Little Sister** is the latest effort from renowned Japanese filmmaker Hirokazu Kore-eda, and while it might be the auteur's most palatable and crowd-pleasing work yet, it eschews stereotypes in favour of a complex study of four strong and uniquely flawed female characters. Koreeda takes a nuanced look at the emotional stunting left behind in the wake of parental abandonment and inattentiveness. It's the rare example of a family drama that's devoid of unnecessary emotional manipulations. Feelings run at a fever pitch throughout, but it all feels reasonable and earned. It feels like being let into the family instead of merely watching one from a distance.*

Nurse Sachi carries on with a man she knows is married. Lovelorn banker Yoshino constantly finds herself heartbroken, and Chika is fun loving, but irresponsible. Together, they create an enclave of love, respect and animosity that would make

Louisa May Alcott proud, all of them retaining unique identities and fears while still having the capacity to come together when it matters most. So rarely are sisterly dynamics depicted in such a way. Each woman is a unique individual, with their own sets of strengths and neuroses, so clashes between the siblings are inevitable. But in the hands of Kore-eda, those moments of tension never lapse into melodrama and they never feel monotonous or boring to behold.

*Such subtlety is a change of pace for Kore-eda, especially since his more recent efforts like **I Wish** and **Like Father, Like Son** dabbled in fence swinging emotional theatricality and were in danger of coming down on the wrong side of precocious. That subtlety allows for the family's history to gently take hold instead of obviously running their lives. It's a film that offers an invitation to get to know the characters while retaining some sense of mystery and trauma to be doled out whenever warranted. It's a film about people who are constantly learning and redefining what it means to care and love for one another, and in that respect, **Our Little Sister** is a gently transformative experience.*

With the exception of several needlessly drawn out dénouements, everything else about Kore-eda's film strikes as comfortably resplendent. The cinematography from Mikiya Takimoto and the score by Yôko Kanno are accomplished technical additions to the film that never distract. The performances are exceptional across the board, with Nagasawa leaving the most indelible impression. On the whole, it's a wonderful work from a wonderful filmmaker.

Andrew Parker: Toronto Film Scene

Our next film: Friday November 11th, 7.30pm A War (Denmark 2015. Cert 15)

Tobias Lindholm (*A Hijacking*) returns to LFS with another morality tale in which actions taken in moments of great stress come under the microscope.

Pilou Asbaek plays Claus Pedersen, a Dane serving with the UN in Afghanistan. When he and his soldiers are caught in an ambush, he takes a decision which he believes at the time to be justified, but which, on his return home, leads to consequences for him and threatens both his career and his marriage.

Lindholm's film explores the complexities surrounding rules of engagement which soldiers are expected to obey and the pressures these create. Expect nothing less than an edge-of-the-seat experience from a film described by Sight and Sound critic Lisa Mullen as "utterly gripping."