



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Still Walking

(Aruitemo Aruitemo)

+ intro by Dr Alexander Jacoby, Senior Lecturer in Japanese Studies
(Wednesday 11 May only)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

In Japanese, there's more than one mode of greeting someone as you enter their house during the day. There's '*konnichiwa*', for example, a generalised, polite 'good afternoon'; or '*tadaima*', which says 'I'm home', and is the province of returning family members. It's an indication of the small but telling details manifest in this gently probing domestic drama that visiting son Ryota utters the former when he arrives at his elderly parents' place for a tense family gathering to mark the 15th anniversary of his brother Junpei's tragic drowning. The distinction is understandably too tricky for the subtitles to register, but while writer-director Hirokazu Koreeda's offering is firmly in the culturally specific 'home drama' mode of Japanese cinema (where greats such as Ozu and Naruse plied their trade), his superficially gentle, utterly affecting film is by no means inaccessible to western viewers. Families not getting on is an international language, after all.

That said, it's the way Koreeda tackles universal emotional issues with a certain Japanese sensibility that has enabled his work to garner international critical mass and touch audiences beyond the festival circuit. Koreeda has returned time and again to examine how and why we carry on with our lives in the shadow of loss: the widow starting afresh in *Maborosi* (1995); the speculative limbo of memories in *Afterlife* (1998); the families torn asunder by an Aum-style cult in *Distance* (2001); even the virtual bereavement of Tokyo kids abandoned by their mother in the Cannes prize-winner *Nobody Knows* (2003). Of course, he has also stepped outside this area with the light-hearted samurai tale *Hana* (2006) and this year's *Air Doll* (in which an inflatable playmate acquires a life of her own). But it's with the earlier films that the former documentarist has marked out a distinct subject-matter and visual approach – in which stylistic reserve painstakingly builds emotional potency – to cement his position at the forefront of his generation of Japanese filmmakers.

Still Walking certainly enhances that reputation. Prompted by Koreeda's feelings of filial inadequacy and regret after his own mother's death, the story is, in a sense, an attempt to recapture lost time by reconstructing a family day together. Knowing these circumstances, his honesty here is both bracing and poignant; this is no golden-hued memoir, but a recognition that bristling personal agendas so often mask underlying familial affections – until it's too late to turn things around. Eased along by summer sun and gentle guitar strumming on the soundtrack, the film's eddying domestic travails spring from an authentic sense that simmering tensions are as much about what remains unspoken as they are about the actual injuries we cause one another.

Even in subtitled form, this is a dialogue masterclass. Sly comments and pointed asides take precedence over upfront speechifying, while revelations are subtly layered in without narrative strategies becoming unduly obvious.

Certainly, the Yokoyama clan have a whole array of resentments on their minds, what with the ageing parents dwelling on the loss of the father's favourite son, while struggling art restorer Ryota (the audience's entry point and presumably a correlate for Koreeda himself, given the film's broadly autobiographical basis) feels left out in the cold. Ryota's parents aren't pleased with his marriage to a widow with a small son, while their own relationship seems irredeemably curdled by the patriarch's past infidelities. In one piercing sequence, when Ryota's mum prevails on him to put on a record of a keening late 1960s pop ditty, 'Blue Light, Yokohama', we presume we're in for a romantic madeleine, yet her intent is to mark her own sufferings in the intervening decades.

As 24 hours unfold, there's an insidious suspense in waiting for it all to blow. Ryota clearly wants recognition from his parents that they were cruel to make him feel the wrong son died, yet they continue to snipe at him from behind hardened attitudes and implacable routine. Gangling Hiroshi Abe's performance as the exasperated son is by no means showy, but he deftly depicts someone seeking a balance between peace-keeping acquiescence and the maintenance of his own self-respect. Yoshio Harada, as the father, is a rather more stolid performer (known in his younger days for hard-boiled *yakuza* roles), but his style works well for the role, while Kirin Kiki's adept portrayal of the mother manages to be at once bustlingly homely yet truly cutting in her passive-aggressive demeanour.

As the key location, the Yokoyamas' house is virtually a character in itself, its traditional layout underlining the old folks' conservatism, as well as taking us back to the interior landscapes of Ozu and Naruse (possibly more so for western viewers than for the Japanese themselves). Koreeda's handling is attuned to an implicit demarcation between the house's public and private spaces, especially in the way the father, a retired doctor, guards his old office as if desperately clinging to any vestigial authority it still conveys. Although there's always a sense of affection present beneath the fractious surface, and there are brief glimpses of happier times when the baby photos come out and the mother cooks her special sweetcorn fritters, the abiding impression is that amid so many unresolved grievances, the most obvious bond between the divided clan is having to persevere in the shadow of death.

In addition to the departed Junpei's annual memorial service (where the hapless stranger he died saving is invited along just so the parents can see him squirm in shame at being alive), this tragic shadow is also manifest in the assiduous washing of Junpei's gravestone. Meanwhile, the elderly mother finds some comfort in regaling everyone with an old wives' tale that the yellow butterflies at the cemetery are actually white ones that have changed colour to cheat mortality and face another summer. This points to a key moment later in the film, when Ryota – who was so disdainful of his mother's yellow butterfly story when she told it – repeats it to his own children, in an attempt to salve his sense of loss.

Koreeda leaves us with a long held image of commuter trains trundling by in the middle distance, a moment whose metaphoric intent is clear, yet which somehow also eschews transcendent uplift – those trains have people on them with the same problems as the rest of us. In the end, though, however one positions *Still Walking* in the firmament of Japan's cinematic achievements, one thing is sure: it belongs up there with the masters.

Trevor Johnston, *Sight & Sound*, February 2010

STILL WALKING (ARUITEMO ARUITEMO)

Directed by: Hirokazu Koreeda
©: Aruitemo Aruitemo (Still Walking) Production Committee
Production Company: Engine Film
Produced by: Engine Film, Bandai Visual, TV Man Union, Eisei Gekijo, CineQuanon
Executive Producers: Kazumi Kawashiro, Yutaka Shigenobu, Takeo Hisamatsu, Lee Bong-ou
Producers: Yoshihiro Kato, Hijiri Taguchi
Development Producer: Masahiro Yasuda
Production Manager: Keiichi Sanbe
Chief Assistant Director: Atsushi Kaneshige
Assistant Directors: Nao Ichihara, Kaoru Endo
Script Supervisor: Miho Iizuka
Written by: Hirokazu Koreeda
Cinematographer: Yutaka Yamazaki
Lighting: Eiji Oshita
Still Photographer: Kenshu Shintsubo
Edited by: Hirokazu Koreeda
Production Design: Toshihiro Isomi, Keiko Mitsumatsu
Costume Designer: Kazuko Kurosawa
Make-up Artist: Mutsuki Sakai
Music: Gontiti
Sound: Yukata Tsurumaki, Shuji Ohtake
English Subtitles by: Linda Hoaglund

Cast

Hiroshi Abe (Ryota Yokoyama)
Yui Natsukawa (Yukari Yokoyama)
You (Chinami Yokoyama)
Kazuya Takahashi (Nobuo Kataoka)
Shohei Tanaka (Atsushi Yokoyama)
Kirin Kiki (Toshiko Yokoyama)
Yoshio Harada (Kyohei Yokoyama)
Ryôga Hayashi (Mutsu Kataoka)
Haruko Kato
Hotaru Nomoto (Satsuki Kataoka)
Susumu Terajima (sushi delivery man)

Japan 2008©
114 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

A Farewell to Arms
Sun 1 May 12:00; Mon 16 May 18:15; Tue 24 May 20:50
Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans
Mon 2 May 12:20; Mon 30 May 18:20
Tokyo Story (Tokyo Monogatari)
Tue 3 May 14:30; Sat 7 May 15:00; Sat 21 May 11:10; Wed 25 May 18:00
The River
Wed 4 May 18:10 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large; Sun 15 May 15:10
El Sur (The South)
Thu 5 May 14:30; Mon 16 May 18:10
Daughters of the Dust
Fri 6 May 20:50; Fri 20 May 14:40; Thu 26 May 20:40
Syndromes and a Century (Sang sattawaat)
Sat 7 May 18:10; Thu 12 May 20:50

Still Walking (Aruitemo aruitemo)
Sun 8 May 15:15; Wed 11 May 17:50 + intro by Dr Alexander Jacoby, Senior Lecturer in Japanese Studies; Mon 23 May 20:45
The Long Day Closes
Mon 9 May 18:30; Sun 22 May 12:30; Thu 26 May 20:50
Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia)
Tue 10 May 20:50; Thu 19 May 18:10; Wed 25 May 20:50; Fri 27 May 18:20
The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)
Fri 13 May 20:45; Tue 17 May 20:50; Sat 28 May 18:15
Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)
Sat 14 May 14:45; Wed 18 May 18:10 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large
The Miracle Worker
Tue 17 May 14:30; Sun 29 May 11:20
The Incredible Shrinking Man
Thu 19 May 14:30; Tue 31 May 18:20

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