

**FILM**

**W**estern audiences tend to associate recent Japanese cinema with endearing but unchallenging comedies like *Shall We Dance?* or over-the-top psycho-killer dramas like Takashi Miike's *Dead or Alive*. But some of the very best work from that country fits neither of these styles.

Gay filmmaker Ryosuke Hashiguchi is not exactly a household name, having made only three features since he began directing in 1993. *The Slight Fever of a 20-Year-Old*, shot on a shoestring budget in 16 millimeter, and the more ambitious *Like Grains of Sand* were enormously successful in Japan but were mostly relegated to the gulag of the film festival circuit in the United States. The latter film particularly has been called one of the best of the 1990s for its penetrating portrayal of adolescent gay romance in a society that continues to view homosexuality as an aberration.

*Hush!*, which opens Feb. 21 at Hollywood Theatre, is unlikely to change the director's standing in the West, which is a shame. This masterful exploration of an unusual triangle—a pair of gay lovers and the woman who wants to use one of them to help her have a child—deserves a wide audience.

Asako (Reiko Kataoka) is a chain-smoking slacker girl making crowns in a dental office. She has had two abortions, has tried to kill herself and is besieged by a self-centered suitor with whom she has unprotected sex.

She meets Katsushiro (Seiichi Tanabe), a partnered but closeted engineer, and decides she likes his eyes enough to ask him to father a child with her—not to get married but simply to provide the sperm, along with a possible friendship.

Katsushiro's lover, Naoya (Kazuya Taka-

**Voices carry**

**Ryosuke Hashiguchi's latest gives characters nowhere to hide**

BY GARY MORRIS

hashi), is not pleased with this possibility. He works at a pet shop and, being out, is appalled by his boyfriend's apparent interest in a heterosexual model of family and children.

Adding to the confusion are other memorable characters who float in and out of these three lives. Asako's creepy quasi-boyfriend pops up at the least opportune times. Katsushiro is plagued by an unhinged stalker girl himself—a pretty lunatic who throws massive fits in public over this unrequited love.

Katsushiro's brother comes to Tokyo, family in tow, to try to figure out his life and strange relationships. And Naoya's mother, a comical fag-hag type, laments with her irritated son that his luck with men is no better than hers.

*Hush!* is both bittersweet comedy and social



A gay couple consider implantation and the inevitable outcome in *Hush!* at Hollywood Theatre

critique, subtly lambasting the repressive society that keeps these characters locked in their private anguish. They're desperate for emotion but disconnected from their own and what's happening around them. After a troubling encounter among the three main characters, for instance, the two men have to ask themselves—as does the audience—whether she is suddenly, inexplicably out of their lives for good. Unanswered pleas for love, or even touch, filigree the film.

Some of the social critique takes the form of black comedy, with the pampered pooches and dizzy housewives of the pet shop—a particularly rich locale in this regard. But there

are plenty of other targets, including an arrogant medical establishment.

Nor does the film spare the queer community. Gay bar scenes, shot in *cinéma vérité* style, show a particularly evil queen ridiculing Asako as only an evil queen can.

Not everyone will appreciate the film's pacing, but attentive viewers will be drawn into its powerful emotional spell. Hashiguchi is a master of the long take, and some of the best sequences are shot uninterrupted, such as an extended quietly brutal confrontation between the three principals and Katsushiro's family. Hashiguchi's earlier films used amateur actors; here he uses experienced ones, who bloom brilliantly under the camera's relentless gaze.

Ultimately, all the film's spaces—the pet shop, various apartments, Katsushiro's brother's house—offer no solace. In *Hush!*, there's no real refuge—only small clusters of people trying to find each other in a cold, uncaring world. **JM**

GARY MORRIS is a Portland free-lance writer who spends his spare time at city hall agitating for mosh pits for the symphony and ballet.

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