



Yûya Yagira was named best actor at Cannes 2004 for his portrayal of Akira.

IFC FILMS, 2005

Childhood's Fragility

Resourceful boy keeps family together.

NOBODY KNOWS (Dare mo shiranai) (Japan, 2004): Written, directed, edited and produced by Hirokazu Kore-eda. Executive producer Yutaka Shigenobu. Cinematography Yutaka Yamasaki. Production design, Toshihiro Isomi, Keiko Mitsumatsu. Original music composed and performed by Titi Matsumura, Gonzalez Mikami. Sound, Yutaka Tsurumaki. Starring Yûya Yagira, Ayu Kitaura, Hiei Kimura, Momoko Shimizu, Hanae Kan and You. IFC Films, 2005. PG-13. 141 minutes. 2004 Cannes Film Festival Best Actor for Yûya Yagira.

In 1988 Japanese newspapers ran a big story about four children abandoned by their mother in Tokyo. The oldest boy took care of his younger siblings, and they lived alone in their small apartment for six months before anyone noticed. The children each had different, absent fathers, who did not help them. The children had never attended school, and three had no birth records.

One of Japan's most original filmmakers, Hirokazu Kore-eda (*After Life*, 1998), followed the story in the press and was moved to write a screenplay. He said he thought about the children for 15 years, then shot the film chronologically over the period of a year. He hired amateur actors for the children's roles. Employing documentary techniques, Kore-eda got lovely performances from all the children. But a star-turn by 12-year-old Yûya Yagira as Akira, the eldest son, is the glue that holds the whole enterprise in exquisite balance.

Kore-eda wrote that he wanted to show the "richness" of the children's life "as seen from inside," which he accomplishes. The film is testament to the remarkable resilience of children to adapt to new circumstances and to their touching pleasure in small things.

In the film, the mother is little more than a child herself. Upbeat and kind of silly, her darker side is that she parties and spends time with boyfriends who don't know she has kids. She gives the children "lessons," teaches them numbers and how to read. She tells them to stay inside the apartment, be quiet and mind Akira. And one night she leaves them with a little money, an empty

promise to return, and a note to Akira, putting him in charge of everything.

The other siblings include 10-year-old Kyoko (Ayu Kitaura), who secretly longs to live like other girls and go to school. Seven-year-old Shigeru (Hiei Kimura) is a boisterous boy who needs to be outside, running and playing. Five-year-old Yuki (Momoko Shimizu) is a sunny girl who makes art and plays all day. Akira's same-age school friend, Saki (Hanae Kan), also has family problems. She eventually quits school and visits the apartment.

Although their mood grows more somber over time, the children find much to enjoy with each other. But when the money runs out, Akira is desperate. He knows that contacting the authorities is not the solution, because the family would be split up, and none of them want that. The suspense over what will happen next is as intense as in an action adventure film. My anxiety level was high. The film slows down as the hungry children become listless. There is such dignity in how they try to keep alive their expectations that their mother will return.

One of the film's joyful moments comes when the youngest girl, Saki, who has never been outside the apartment, persuades Akira to take her to look for their mother. She wears little squeaky sandals that will break your heart. Another poignant moment involves Akira getting drafted to play baseball for a school team. He dresses in a uniform and looks like all the others.

And while Kore-eda's cinematically beautiful film is almost unbearably sad, the worst feeling is knowing that children are left homeless and abandoned every day in this country and indeed in all the world's cities. Childhood poverty and hunger in our own community are no less urgent than Tokyo's. Do your part to help solve such societal neglect.

Nobody Knows, tender and unforgettable, gets my highest recommendations. It opens at the Bijou Friday May 27. See it early or it may be gone.

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