

2009 JAPAN FILM FESTIVAL

By Robin Menken
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Laurence Thrush's elegant narrative feature "Left Handed" is a poetic black and white portrait of Hiroshi, a teen who locks himself away in his room. In order to make the most of a very low budget, first-time feature helmer Laurence Thrush and D.P. Gary Young have used every frame of this small drama as an emotional painting. From the opening shots in a claustrophobic Cram school, we know we're in the hands of cinema practitioners. As passing students leave the test room, and failing students take the test again, we notice passive Hiroshi refusing to join in. The busy frame is full of architectural elements, passing students, legs, faces and body parts in extreme close-up. The only medium shot is one of Hiroshi, head down on the desk, after the other cram students have left and the teacher notices the lone student.

The inventive compositions are modern, verging on abstraction. In a shot of a building's outside staircase, Hiroshi enters and leaves the frame, while we savor the patterns made by the black balustrade. It's reminiscent of second generation neo-realists like (the early) Ermanni Olmi. Early on, while Hiroshi still interacts with the outside world, he plays hooky. At a lunch counter he converses with an office secretary. The camera is counter level as she leans in and out of frame, her soft -focus face filling the lower left corner, he sits stationary on the right side of frame, watching her and answering her questions. When younger brother ask him what's wrong, he tear off his backpack, dumping it on the ground. We watch their tussle as shadow play on a wall.

Wandering the city he stares at the cityscape from a high stair well. He still shoots marbles with other kids, but soon even that is too demanding and he withdraws to his room, leaving notes for first his younger brother, and then his distraught mother Yoshiko (Masako Innami). One simply says "50 waters", another "soft drinks & comics." Time passes as he self-incarcerates.

Younger brother Yuhei (Kento Oguri) is the first to realize there's something wrong. Countless meals pass as worried mother and Yuhei waiting for Hiroshi to join them. Hiroshi's door remains closed at the top of the stairs. Since the home is mother's province, she internalizes blame for Hiroshi's mysterious behavior.

When we finally meet the father Toru Okada (Takeshi Furusawa), he tries to drag Hiroshi out of his littered room. When his attempts at exerting discipline fail, he seems willing to wait Hiroshi out.

Answering a school note, Yoshiko exposes the family problem and upsets Toru. Yoshiko tries to convince her husband to seek help, but shamed and worried about the effects of the scandal on his career and the younger son's future, he refuses. She goes on as if nothing is wrong. The shame-based family is paralyzed.

One day she slips a note into Hiroshi's room asking him to decide which parent he wants to live with. Toru is taking a job in Sendai, another city. They are separating. Hiroshi's note says father (mother's name is crossed out), although apparently he can't leave the room to move out. Poor Yoshiko, the victim of Hiroshi's illness watches her family move out.

Eighteen months pass, Yoshiko still leaving food trays outside the door, and listening for sounds inside the roof to know her son's alive.

Eventually she visits the Youth Center group home, specializing in children suffering from the uniquely Japanese condition of Hikikomori, estimated to affect one million young Japanese. Japanese suburban teens (most often the eldest son) stay in their room for months or years, sleeping by day and reading or surfing the computer all night, self-incarcerating as a refuge against the demands of the Gambare (Do your best!) society around them.

Kudo Sadatsugu, the Center's head counselor, played himself. Sturdy, gentle Kudo works miracles, slowly building trust with Hiroshi. Kudo asks Hiroshi to study his voice "You must be lonely. I'll never try to frighten you, or let you be in pain. Just listen to my voice and try to imagine what kind of a person I am." Eventually, after five monthly visits, he announces to Hiroshi that he's entering the room. Stepping over aluminum cans littered floor. Kudo penetrates the boy's lair. Hiroshi, his back to him, sits before the computer monitor. Once inside, Kudo tells Hiroshi stories of other sequestered kids, explaining that he considers parents who stand by and do nothing the same as child abusers.

In an inventive extreme close up, Hiroshi's face is seen reflected in the silvered CD he twirls in his hands, It's the first time we've seen his face in a while. The image of idle time wasting penetrates Hiroshi's state of mind.

We rarely enter his room. In the early stages, the room is lit and normal. We still don't realize that he's sequestered. Later we watch him in the darkened room, reading. After Kudo's visit to his room, when Hiroshi considers going outside to move to the center, we see him peer out a crack of the door.

Occasional music by "Pan American" (Mark Nelson) increases the melancholy. At times the sound design in the score seems like the sussurent patter of rain, at times it reassembles the pop and crack of a scratched vinyl record. Thrush commented that Pan American was inspired by the sound of his unborn child in the womb.

Thrush's first documentary "Fidel's Fight" won Best Cinematography at the 2001 New York Independent Film Festival. He self-financed/ produced a series of activist PSA's and was short-listed for the Best Young Director Award at the Clio Advertising Awards and the Cannes Film Festival in 2003. Executive Producer Saiki, Takao's commercial production company SIZE helped develop the project, researching and making contacts in Japan. "Left Handed" (Tobira no Muko) premiered at the Rhode Island International Film Festival, winning Best Feature, then played Rotterdam and The Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival in Estonia. After it's Los Angeles premiere at JFFLA, it will play at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival. DO NOT MISS!