



Our 30-Minute Sessions

サヨナラまでの 30 分

2020/114min/Colour/English Subtitles
Distributor: Asmic Ase

Director: HAGIWARA Kentaro

Cast: ARATA Mackenyu, KITAMURA Takumi, KUBOTA Sayu

Online screening information:

Thu 25 Feb 48 hour rental window from 6.00pm

Wed 3 Mar 48 hour rental window from 6.00pm

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Appearances aren't everything, that's the message of this genial slice of magical realism that recalls the high-concept body-swap narratives of titles such as *Big* (1988), *Freaky Friday* (2003) and *17 Again* (2009). Not that our main protagonist, Sota Kubota, seems to care anyway. He's quite happy loitering in the background avoiding the eye of attention, or so he claims at one point. That says, the lack of any degree of forcefulness to his personality is clearly holding him back, as can be seen in an opening job interview scene where, even hidden amongst six seemingly identical-looking candidates, his feeble argument for his employment – that his lack of friends means there would be no one to distract him from his work – marks him out from the crowd in completely the opposite way he hopes. The negative outcome of his interview, delivered mere moments afterwards in the form of a curt email, at least looks set to spare him temporarily from the drone-like monotony of the white-collar world. But what sort of future exactly does Sota envisage for himself?

Then one day, a freak gust of wind draws his attention to an old Sony Walkman left lying in the leaf litter containing a cassette labelled by hand with the cryptic letters 'ECHOLL'. Curiously, he presses the play button and a sudden change sweeps over him. He immediately jumps up and rushes off into town, running up to a girl he appears to know, addressing her as Kana and lunging forth to embrace her. Kana herself looks understandably shocked by this abrupt encounter, but no less so than the bewildered doppelganger of Sota, who appears standing aghast in the background witnessing this bizarre scenario as if it were an out-of-body experience. If the hectic construction of this brief but pivotal sequence appears confusing to the viewer, then the next edit only serves to yank the rug further from under our feet: Sota the active protagonist is left sprawling on the ground after Kana violently thrusts him away, while Sota the disoriented third-party witness now appears to our eyes as someone completely different.

Indeed, completely different he is - By pressing play on the tape, Sota had unwittingly resurrected the spirit of Aki Miyata, the former frontman of the local band known as ECHOLL, who had died just a year before, aged just 22, in a fatal accident shortly after the band's debut. With his stylish long kimono jacket and studiously tussled hair, the flamboyant Aki is the polar opposite of Sota, whose beige polo shirt and Uniqlo chinos point to his unassuming approach to life. Nevertheless, once invoked, Aki sticks close to his heels, following Sota literally everywhere, subjecting the retiring youth to a perpetual barrage of pep talks, yet remaining invisible to everyone else.

The girl Kana, it transpires, was not only a fellow bandmember, happy to merge into the melodic background on the keyboard while Aki's star shone in front, but she was also romantically linked to Aki. Sota, meanwhile, is a student at the same college as Kana, although she has never so much as acknowledged his presence.

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Nevertheless, each press of the play button allows the spirit of Aki to slip into Sota's body, and in doing so offers Aki the possibility of finishing off his earthly business while Sota is able to slink back into invisibility where he is happiest.

And so Aki's attempts to fulfil his dream of re-grouping his former bandmates and getting back with Kana face serious challenges. The first is that Aki, while inhabiting Sota's body, might well see himself as the same confident bandleader he always was. However, he appears to everyone else, including Kana, in the drab form of Sota: at best a nerdy but uncannily spot-on tribute act to the deceased ECHOLL bandleader, and at worst an over-enthusiastic, slightly sinister fan obsessive. A more significant obstacle is that since Aki's passing, Kana has withdrawn into her own joyless world, refusing to have anything to do with music anymore and cloistering herself in her work in a dusty used bookstore.

Oh yes - there's one final hurdle, which is that the personality swap lasts only as long as the 30-minute duration of one side of a cassette.

In many respects, *Our 30-minute Session* provides a wonderful companion piece to the poignant nostalgia of Yukihiro Tsutsui's *Initiation Love* (2015), which played as part of the Japan Foundation UK's 2018 touring programme themed *(Un)true Colours: Secrets and Lies in Japanese Cinema*. The main difference is that while Tsutsui's bitter-sweet tale of a romance rooted in the 1980s structured its two-part narrative in accordance with the contrasting mood music contained on the A and B sides of a mixtape of pop hits, Hagiwara's more recent film seems to be less nostalgic for the specific songs and fashions of a bygone era than for a lost authenticity associated with the physical objects we hold so dear in our youth, be they books, cassettes or guitars. Aki springs from the analogue signals of the cassette tape that houses his spirit like a benevolent version of Sadako, the ghostly and ghastly centrepiece of the classic J-horror *Ring* (1988), while a character at one point recalls the pleasure he took as a youngster in disassembling and reassembling a clock to see how it works.

This emphasis on the tactile, almost magical qualities of music and other artforms and their means of delivery provides a neat thematic undercurrent to the film's central conceit, which is never to judge a book by its cover. Can Aki in the guise of Sota coax Kana back to the keyboard? And as Sota soon gains in confidence under the tutelage of his new guardian angel and Kana begins to see something behind his unassuming surface in the moments he is allowed to be himself, we wonder if the two very different personalities who share the same body are equally open to sharing her? On the surface, *Our 30-minute Session* might seem to present us with a classic love-triangle set-up, but of course, things are never quite as straightforward as they appear.

Jasper Sharp