



A Beloved Wife

喜劇 愛妻物語

2019/115min/Colour/English Subtitles

Distributor: Color Bird

Director: ADACHI Shin

Cast: HAMADA Gaku, MIZUKAWA Asami, NIITSU Chise

Online screening information:

Wed 24 Feb 48 hour rental window from 6.00pm

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The typical romantic comedy conforms to a fixed set of tropes: the meet-cute, love at first sight, a range of obstacles impeding the romance's progress (often involving a love rival), and finally marriage (or at least consummation), and a closing implication that the besotted couple will live happily ever after. The title of Shin Adachi's **A Beloved Wife** (in Japanese, 喜劇 愛妻物語, translating literally as 'Comedy Love Wife Story') may seem to promise this genre, but is in fact a sort of anti-romcom. Set ten years after Gota Yanagida (Gaku Hamada) and Chika (Asami Mizukawa) got hitched, the film's focus is on the wear and tear in a fraying relationship from which the romance has long since evaporated, with marriage itself presented more as a fighting arena than an idealised haven from the harsh realities of the outside world. The sign on the Yanagidas' apartment door may announce a 'Merry Home', but inside is only frustration, resentment and recrimination.

"It's been about two months since I last had sex with my wife," is the opening line of the film, delivered in a voiceover from Gota which goes on not just to detail his horniness, but also to state that the only thing stopping him fulfilling his needs with a prostitute is his inability to afford one. "I want to have sex once or twice a month at least," he says, in words that are juxtaposed to the image of a motivational post-it note at his desk which reads: "I wish to write script for a serial drama and a popular film once a year!" Yet the 'honorable mention'-winning screenplay **Violent Hot Spring** that he wrote a decade ago was his last tangible success - and now his professional and sexual frustrations have become tightly bound together. "If I were a popular, successful scenario writer," Gota says, "I would want to take one or two mistresses." Yet if he were a more successful scenario writer, Chika might also be more willing to have sex with him. As things are, she has been worn down by her 'loser' husband's litany of failures, and the need that this has created for her work to support both of them. When we first see this couple in bed, their young daughter Aki (Chise Niitsu) is lying between them - but far from being an impediment to their relationship (and their sexual relations), Aki is the only thing keeping her unhappy parents together. In a sense, she is always between them, stuck in the middle between an irresistible force and an immovable object.

Loosely structured around a budget trip taken by this Tokyo family to Kagawa province, **A Beloved Wife** is a series of holiday snapshots that encapsulate this family doing what it always does. Gota is ostensibly touring the region for research on a spec screenplay, even though he and Chika learn on the first day that this new project, like so many others, has fallen through. So now the ever appetitive Gota hopes to live it up with the local food and some vacation sex, even as Chika makes a performative display of keeping the purse strings tight, and also roundly rebuffs Gota's every advance, while drinking as much as she can in a vain attempt to dull her misery and rage. Neither is particularly likeable, but Gota comes in for particularly vicious scrutiny, as his randy quest for satisfaction marks him an inattentive father, a manipulative adulterer and a creepy sex pest. Chika may be

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relentless in accusing him of wheedling manipulation and pathetic fecklessness, but it is also clear that her endless henpecking harangues are bang on target.

"It's fun to watch them, isn't it?", comments Chika's friend Yumi (Kaho) to Aki as the married couple launches into yet another rancorous slanging match. This is the paradox of Adachi's film which, despite its shrill foregrounding of the Yanagidas' deep dysfunction and prolonged pain, never ceases to amuse the viewer. This is helped by Shogo Kaida's hilariously bombastic score, by a range of grotesque minor characters, and by the actor Hamada who, with his high-pitched voice and hangdog/horndog facial expression, plays Gota as an (in one scene, literally) arrested manchild who always looks like a little boy engaged in furtive naughtiness. Perhaps the bittersweet tone is best encapsulated by a climactic scene of crisis in which both Chika and Aki collapse in tears, and Gota, in trying to join them on the ground, cannot help laughing instead.

Adding to the film's dark humour is the strange frisson of our knowledge that this warts-and-all portrait of a disintegrating family is in fact based on Adachi's own home life. For Adachi has adapted his screenplay from his 2016 novel *Chibusa ni Ka*, which drew heavily from his own experiences as an out-of-work screenwriter and the stressful effects of unemployment on relations with his wife. So if the film seems ungenerous, even unforgiving, towards its characters, it is also, for all its exaggerated presentation, essentially autobiographical, with Adachi only laughing at himself. When, near the end, Gota discusses with Chika how he should start writing novels, and think about directing his own scripts, we are in a privileged position to know that this couple, for all their constant, seemingly terminal bickering, will come good in the end. After all, Gota, or at least his real-life model, will eventually find a way to turn his own writings into finished, funny films, and **A Beloved Wife** is itself, along with Adachi's previous self-scripted **14 That Night (14 no yoru, 2016)**, the ultimate proof of his success - even if it will leave audiences wondering whether our priapic protagonist is now getting any at home.

Anton Bitel