



his

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2020/127min/Colour/English Subtitles
Distributor: Nagoya TV

Director: IMAIZUMI Rikiya

Cast: MIYAZAWA Hio, FUJIWARA Kisetsu

Online screening information:

Thu 25 Feb 48 hour rental window from 6.00pm

Mon 8 Mar 48 hour rental window from 6.00pm

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The opening scene of *His* perfectly establishes the character of Nagisa (Fujiwara Kisetsu), first seen fooling around with his boyfriend, Shun (Miyazawa Hio). Playfully telling Shun's fortune, he describes him as co-operative, reserved and as someone who "feels more joy serving others than getting his own way". He then asks if he can take Shun's sweater as his own before blurting out, seemingly out of nowhere, the devastating line: "Shun – let's break up". It is the last time the two men will see each other for several years, when Nagisa turns up at Shun's house in the countryside with a young daughter, Sora (Sotomura Sakura), in tow, hoping to stay with him and possibly re-kindle their relationship.

Fujiwara plays Nagisa as impetuous, lacking in self-awareness and ready to exploit other people's kindness. He is also loving, sweet and a lot of fun to be around, and evolves as the narrative progresses. You can see why both his soon-to-be ex-wife, Rena (Matsumoto Wakana), and Shun fell in love with him, and why both now nurse complex, bitter feelings. Shun has demons of his own, living in constant fear of his homosexuality being discovered by his neighbours, while Rena struggles to maintain a healthy balance between her family life and her professional life. When Rena starts proceedings to claim full custody of Sora, the stage is set for all three characters to reckon with their pasts, and plan for their futures.

His echoes some of themes of other queer Japanese films, such as Takamasa Oe's *Athlete* (2019), in which a father, whose wife has demanded a divorce, begins a relationship with another man. *Close-Knit* (2017), Oigami Naoko's marvellous melodrama about a young girl taken in by her uncle and his transgender girlfriend when her mother abandons her, shares even closer similarities. Both *Close-Knit* and *His* sensitively question the traditional family set-up, and the role of queer people as parents.

Although the two men take centre stage, the female characters are all interesting and complex. Two moments of intense silence – one when Misato, one of Shun's neighbours, has just confessed her attraction to Shun, another, when Rena's frosty mother gazes at a gay couple in a restaurant – are beautifully acted by Matsumoto Honoka and Nakamura Kumi respectively. Director Imaizumi Rikiya elicits a miracle of a performance from young Sotomura as Sora, who gives a naturalistic, guileless depiction of a girl unable to comprehend why her parents suddenly seem to despise one another.

While Japan has been cited by LGBTQ+ charity Stonewall as being one of the most accepting countries regarding attitudes towards queer people, same-sex marriage and adoption have yet to be recognised; the latter is a major theme of *His*. Imaizumi subverts expectations throughout. While rural communities are often depicted in films as homophobic upholders of traditional heterosexual relationships, in *His*, the gossip surrounding Shun and Nagisa is, by and large curious rather than vindictive.

The nastiest moments of homophobia occur in the court room scenes in Tokyo, where the ugliness of custody battles is frankly depicted – the cruelty of the attacks on both Nagisa and Rena are far harsher than anything seen in Hollywood divorce dramas such as *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979). The critique of a legal system that can treat human beings so callously is predicted in an early scene, where Shun dozes under a copy of Kafka’s nightmarish novel *The Trial*. The Japanese legal system, and its perceived bias against marginalised communities, was criticised in Toda Hikaru’s marvellous documentary *Of Love & Law* (2017), in which we meet a gay couple run a law firm specialising in defending minorities.

Shun and Nagisa were first introduced to Japanese audiences in the mini-series *His - I Didn't Think I Would Fall In Love* (2019), also directed by Imaizumi, in which the two boys, played by different actors, meet as teenagers in the seaside town of Fujisawa and find they are attracted to another. Despite the director and the characters, the series, which is very hard to see in the UK and clearly aimed at a teen audience, is tonally very different from the feature film. As with his film *Little Nights, Little Love* (2019, screened as part of last year’s Japan Foundation Touring Film Programme), Imaizumi shows great sensitivity in depicting unconventional romantic relationships.

His ends with a prolonged, deeply moving long shot. Earlier in the film, Misato, after she has fixed a plumbing issue in Shun’s house, says of the village: “Try to enjoy the adventure, that’s the joy of living here”. It’s a message that could equally apply to life in general, and one which this kind, pensive film ultimately hopes its characters – and its viewers – will also embrace.

Alex Davidson

Cinema Curator, Barbican