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## **Shoplifters (15)**

*dir:* **Kore-eda Hirokazu**

*Starring:* **Lily Franky, Ando Sakura, Matsuoka Mayu**

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**Synopsis:** Tokyo, present day. Osamu and Nobuyo live in a ramshackle house with elderly Hatsue, young boy Shota and teenage Sayaka. They shoplift to support their household budget which their low-paid jobs cannot fully cover. One evening, Osamu finds Juri, a young girl, apparently abandoned on the street. They take her in, disguise her and train her to help with their shoplifting. They are aware their activities may be noticed by the authorities. When Hatsue dies suddenly, they bury her to avoid detection. Shota realises that he is not their natural son. He is hurt when a shopkeeper chases him and ends up in hospital. The authorities become involved. Their investigations show that Osamu and Nobuyo are implicated in kidnapping and possible murder. Juri and Shota return to their natural parents. The authorities take action against Osamu and Nobuyo,

It's a critical truism that Koreeda Hirokazu's domestic dramas have made him the modern heir to the likes of Ozu and Naruse. Those Japanese old masters, however, never cut and diced the nuclear family in the way Koreeda has done so assiduously in the course of his expanding and increasingly valuable filmography.

Right back in 2003, *Nobody Knows* put together different kids from different fathers in a Tokyo apartment and left them to create their own sibling bonds after their single mum abandons them. Subsequently, *I Wish* (2011) cast two brothers to opposite ends of Kyushu when parental discord places one twin with the aggrieved mum, the other with the feckless dad, but saw brotherly connections maintained by the prospect of a new bullet-train line. From split to switch in *Like Father, Like Son* (2013), where the discovery of a hospital mix-up left the posh architect and happy-scrappy shopkeeper realising they'd been bringing up each other's biological offspring for the previous 6 years, setting up an exchange to test the very meaning of parenthood. Meanwhile, in *Our Little Sister* (2015), the death of the father who'd long since forsaken three daughters for a second wife and family offers them the chance to rebuild bridges when their half-sister from the second marriage comes to live with them in idyllic Kamakura. By contrast, in *After the Storm* (2016), it's actually the shambling dad trying to put things back to the way they were, after a typhoon lands him, his son and his ex-wife under the same roof to reconsider where it all went wrong.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that Koreeda had already moved the same pieces around the board every which way. But then comes *Shoplifters*, the film that could be seen as a culmination or summation of his achievements to date. After introducing us to a man and a young boy working in tandem to thief from a supermarket, it returns to the rundown old house they call home, where there's also what looks like grandma, a mother figure and a



college-age daughter. A poor but happy family, then? Soon they are joined by a new arrival, a cute little girl from the neighbourhood whose mother has clearly been neglecting her. It's more than an overnight mercy mission, since before long she is out on the knock with the rest of the gang, while on the TV news we see the distress of a mum unaware that her missing daughter is just streets away. All of this gets us wondering about the rest of the clan - can you really pick'n'mix kids and grown-ups like this and call it a family? And whatever you call it, does the emotional mileage of lived, shared experience form a bond as strong as the chain links of DNA?

Questions, questions, and over the next 2 hours the precise backstory of how these folks came together becomes clearer, as Koreeda signals his sense of a broader definition of 'family' - even if this means flouting convention and the law. It's an utterly absorbing journey, not least because as viewers we have to pay attention to every little nuance of behaviour and seemingly throwaway aside, (why does the ring leader want his little apprentice to call him 'Papa?'). These characters don't speak in handy expository nuggets but allow the audience to catch up - it's a mark of Koreeda's masterly writing skills that he is prepared to risk the gradual accumulation of information, taking plenty of time to put the whole picture on show. That's quite a turnaround from the story structure in many of his previous offerings, where the conceit - swapped babies, divided or reunited siblings and so on - is flagged early on, and the narrative tension is about how everyone will cope with their changed circumstances. The *Shoplifters* approach undoubtedly makes it more challenging to write - and more demanding for the audience - but is ultimately even more rewarding for its cumulative immersive effect. It requires your investment, but amply pays it back.

That's quite aside from the whole issue of approval or disapproval and how it affects our response to these, well, criminal protagonists. The stigma around breaking the law is even greater in Japan than it is in the West, but the film resists snap judgements, pointing out that the central, a couple, Osamu and Nobuyo (geezery Koreeda regular Lily Franky and the very impressive and Ando Sakura as his careworn partner), are also holding down jobs in construction and laundry, where their bosses take advantage of their precarious circumstances to deny them fair treatment. Since this makes them the 'working poor', we might possibly allow a tad more understanding of their illicit snaffling of groceries for the dinner table, yet Koreeda doesn't give them a free pass. For all the affection and camaraderie in the household, denying the younger kids schooling in order to keep hidden the group's activities (which extend to lovable old deer Kiki Kilin continuing to draw her ex husband's pension after his demise) is a damaging and ultimately

untenable state of affairs.

And certainly, this is a much more layered portrayal than the somewhat loaded conflict pitching salt-of-the-Earth shopkeeper against snooty highflyer in *Like Father, Like Son*. However, just as that film suggested filial love is something a dad has to earn rather than simply expect, here we see the ragtag mob becoming a family (in all but name) before our very eyes, Koreeda spends considerable screen time in their ramshackle abode. Mealtimes, banter and domestic routines unfold to progressively beguiling effect, shaped by canny underplaying from the adults and the sunshiny utterly natural performances that, Koreeda always gets from his child actors. The tone and social-conscience element, though, are closer to the grittier realm of *Nobody Knows* than the slightly too sweet charms of *I Wish* and *Our Little Sister*, with an undercurrent of insidious foreboding throughout. Discovery looms, and this dream-life surely can't last forever. It makes the soaring set-piece highlights of bonding bliss over a sudden snowfall or a day out at the beach scene less like staged Kodachrome moments and more a case of fragmentary joys to be preserved as sustenance during the hard times to come.

Inevitably, as fate and the final half-hour turn the screws, we realise the preciousness of what we've been witnessing. No one in the house is exactly what they seem, and yet their choice to love each other, their decision to care, has been as real as it gets. There's the old saying 'You can't choose your family', yet this is precisely what they have done, in defiant response to the marginalized social status that has denied them the choices in life that are pretty much taken for granted by other more sober, upstanding citizens. Koreeda has built up such a palpable empathy that the film's ending leaves us feeling truly bereft. As its ramifications sink in, we are left pondering whether authoritarian procedures might benefit from a little more wiggle room. This is socially engaged cinema with a light touch, and well worth its Cannes Palme d'Or.

Whether it's Sasaki Miyu as the little tot abductee who steals your heart, Lily Franky's irresistibly charismatic rascal, the late Kiki Kilin bowing out gracefully, or an absolutely remarkable turn from Ando Sakura, as the stoic mask breaks and all the hurt comes pouring out, the combined cast make an indelible mark. For all that, it's Koreeda's triumph: the filigree craftsmanship is worthy of admiration and analysis, it almost goes without saying, yet what really makes this special is the sheer depth and compassion and knowing humanity behind every frame.

#### Credits

<b>Shibata Osamu</b>	Lily Franky
<b>Shibata Nobuyo</b>	Ando Sakura
<b>Shibata Aki "Sayaka"</b>	Matsuoka Mayu
<b>Shibata Shota</b>	Jyo Kairi
<b>Hojo Juri</b>	Sasaki Myu
<b>Shibata Hatsue</b>	Kiki Kilin
<b>Director</b>	Kore-eda Hirokazu
<b>Screenplay</b>	Kore-eda Hirokazu
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Kondo Ryuto
<b>Editor</b>	Kore-eda Hirokazu
<b>Production design</b>	Mitsumatsu Keiko
<b>Music</b>	Hosono Harumi
<b>Sound</b>	Tomita Kazuhiko

**Japan 2018. 120 mins**

#### Another view

Lily Franky is the kind of grown-up you would have loved to have known as a child. Impish, infectiously energetic and with a killer giggle, he stars in Hirokazu Koreeda's Palme d'Or winner as Osamu, a man who can turn any space into a playground and any

scenario into a game.

Not only is this ceaseless imagination a warm characteristic of this construction worker-cum-petty criminal, it's also a trick to survive. Through secret signs and routines, Osamu and his surrogate son Shota (Jyo Kairi) lift everyday items from their neighbouring stores. It's a well-oiled collaboration pulled off with Danny Ocean-style slickness (minus the swagger, save for a modest fist bump). "Whatever's in the store doesn't belong to anyone yet," is the Shibata family motto, a fitting slogan as both family and motto don't exactly sit within society.

Huddled in the confines of a makeshift home, Osamu and Shota live as part of a mismatched family bound by poverty. There's Osamu's wife, Nobuyo (Sakura Ando), and Aki (Mayu Matsuoka), a younger woman whose relationship within the family remains unclear. The late Kirin Kiki plays matriarch Hatsue, shedding the gentle charm that made her so enchanting in Naomi Kawase's *Sweet Bean* for something a little more wicked, but no less watchable.

Each have their own way of contributing: Nobuyo works in a laundry house, pocketing anything that falls out of the clothes she cleans; Hatsue takes money from the family of her former husband; Aki performs in a strip booth, joking with Hatsue about the value of a little sideboob.

Koreeda has found a stellar cast for his motley crew, with unquestionably strong performances throughout, but Ando is particularly striking as Nobuyo. A complex young woman old before her time, she wears a near-constant expression of amusement, always trying to do the best for people even if it means telling them things they don't want to hear.

The family dynamic is laid bare with the rescuing of Yuri (played by disarmingly adorable newcomer Miyu Susaki), a taciturn five-year-old who the boys find alone on a bitterly cold night. Through her muteness (there are hints of domestic abuse from her real parents) we observe the unusual bonds that tie the household together. Koreeda skillfully illustrates what measured affection looks like; a self-made family unit aware that there is no obligation or sentiment between them, yet they stay together anyway.

In an illuminating scene, Osamu and Nobuyo, alone in the house on an uncharacteristically quiet afternoon, move from slurping noodles in icy water to having sex in a way that lacks romance but isn't without love. Koreeda, who also edited the film, brings such a stillness to *Shoplifters* that when the family ties fray and snap it's met with quiet devastation instead of a big emotional crescendo – a sad confirmation that this is a household that knew its days were numbered.

Herein lies the film's greatest strength: at its heart is a group of people living with the hidden knowledge that consequences will eventually catch up with them, so they must make the most of the time they have together.

**Beth Webb: Little White Lies**

#### **Our next screening: Friday April 26th, 7.30pm The Rider (USA 2017, Cert 15)**

A film about a rodeo rider in South Dakota with a non-professional cast? Sounds less than promising, but do not be put off; *The Rider* is beautiful to look at, intelligently filmed, sensitively written and incredibly compassionate, a humane and richly rewarding piece of work from the talented Chloe Zhao. "A complete surprise and a masterpiece in every way,"