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‘Shoplifters’ Review: A Family That Steals Together, Stays Together

Shoplifters NYT Critic's Pick Directed by Hirokazu Koreeda Drama R 121min
By Manohla Dargis Nov. 22, 2018

A lot of movies try to sell the sanctity or pathology of the family, sliding over complications that might get in the way of easy endings. In “Shoplifters,” a beautifully felt family drama, the Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda dives into the mess with a story about a household on the ragged edge. From father to son, the family presents an unusual domestic portrait, though what you notice is that its struggles don’t ennoble it. The mother and father work, but there’s slyness here and hardness. And the family steals — food, toiletries, whatever — thieving to live but also as a way of life.

Kore-eda has the sensitive, calibrated touch of a master safecracker, and **he’s a virtuoso of emotional and narrative buildup. His nuanced approach and self-effacing visual style give you room to breathe and to think; he doesn’t try to bludgeon you into feeling.** (He knows the emotions will come.) His way of discreetly unwrapping stories and people is pleasurable; you never feel as if he’s gaming you. But it’s also a shrewd way to build suspense. Even when something out of the ordinary happens — as when this family kidnaps a child — the movie’s pulse remains fairly steady even as yours begins racing.

Kore-eda’s great subject is the contemporary family, a topic that gives him an immensity of themes, including loss, love, class, alienation in the modern world and just about everything else. He’s especially interested in — and brilliant at directing — children, whose vulnerabilities recurrently become the fulcrum of his stories. In “Like Father, Like Son,” a bourgeois father decides to relinquish his young son, who was switched with another child at birth. It’s a tragic setup that Kore-eda marshals for an exploration of love and the cascading brutalities of social convention.

The family in “Shoplifters” returns Kore-eda to the marginalized world of one of his best movies, “Nobody Knows,” about young children abandoned by their mother. The setup in “Shoplifters” seems more ordinary and straightforward, and its family — an affectionate, likably chaotic group — initially comes across more as eccentric or freewheeling than anything else. Everything looks fairly ordinary, if cramped and cluttered, without such middle-class givens as personal space and beds. The youngest child, Shota (Kairi Jyo), a solemn boy of around 10 with a boy-band shock of hair, sleeps in a dark nook that looks a lot like a storage cabinet.

The house grows more crowded with the arrival of Juri (Miyu Sasaki), an unsettlingly melancholic, physically reserved girl of 5. Shota and the father, Osamu (a great Lily Franky, by turns affable and unsavory), first see the girl shivering outside her home. It’s night and they are returning from one of their raids on a grocery store, walking and talking while munching on snacks. They hear Juri first, moving about outside her door, her parents nowhere in sight. “She’s there again,” says Osamu. Before long, Juri is in Osamu and Shota’s house nibbling croquettes. “You’re so skinny,” Grandma (Kilin Kiki), tells her, right before noticing the scars stippling the tiny girl’s body.

In most movies, a kidnapped child is enough to get the story up and jumping. Juri's presence has a far more subtle effect on the narrative and the family, which itself suggests that there's more to it than quirks and offbeat personalities. Several months after Juri arrives, her disappearance hits the news. Osamu and the rest of the family agree that it certainly looks bad, their understatement drifting into grim comedy. But they decide that it's too late to do anything, including return Juri to her abusive parents. Osamu's partner, Nobuyo (a fantastic Sakura Ando), instead cuts Juri's hair and takes her shopping, holding up little dresses for approval before stuffing them into bags.

In Kore-eda's movies well-meaning people make terrible choices. And so life continues much the same, although the news about Juri — and the family's unblinking pragmatism — unsettles the inaugural calm. Or, rather, considering that no one seems really rattled by what the kidnapping might mean for the family's future, you begin questioning your original perceptions, rewinding scenes and sentences for new meaning. Who are these people, you wonder as Kore-eda adds more revealing detail and nuance, his calm camera steadily keeping the family centered as they slurp their noodles.

Kore-eda also wrote and edited "Shoplifters," and he builds momentum as he fills in a larger family portrait, often by following individual members separately into the world. Osamu works in construction, pushing brooms. Nobuyo works in a laundry, where she presses clothes after sneakily emptying their pockets. The family's adult daughter, Aki (Mayu Matsuoka), works at a sex club. There, in a row of semiprivate booths, she and other women perform for anonymous clients, shedding underwear to mechanically bob up and down before smoked windows. It's a predictably bleak snapshot of alienation, but Kore-eda also makes it devastating.

Much of the time, Kore-eda follows Shota and Juri as they wander about and occasionally steal from stores. Shota doesn't go to school — he thinks that staying home indicates some kind of special status — but he's a smart kid. He also already seems like an old soul, with adult composure and watchful, worried eyes that can seem as sad as Juri's. He's initially jealous of her, but soon warms to the younger child. In a brief scene that speaks to Kore-eda's idealism about other people, a storekeeper who Shota targets gives the children some candy and tells the boy not to make his sister steal.

Midway through "Shoplifters," Kore-eda has revealed just enough about the family — there's a scramble from authority and an amusingly cunning shakedown — that it no longer seems to hold much mystery. **But it's at this point where other mysteries take over and where "Shoplifters" deepens, opening up a story about a family with a declaration of moral principles and lifting what had been a good movie into greatness.** In the past, Kore-eda's delicacy has at times enervated his movies. Here, though, the family's toughness, thieving and secrets, its poverty and desperation, work like ballast on his sensibilities. In their grubby imperfections, **Kore-eda finds a perfect story about being human.**