

15th Tokyo Filmex—Part 2

Life in modern Tokyo, and life during the two world wars: *Kabukicho Love Hotel*, *Tsili* and *Theeb*

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This is the second and concluding article on this year's Tokyo Filmex, an international film festival, held November 22-30. Part 1 was posted December 17.

Kabukicho Love Hotel is the latest film by Japanese director Ryuichi Hiroki. Hiroki (born 1954) started in the 1980s in the soft-porn genre called “pink film,” and has since moved to mainstream filmmaking with noted works such as *800 Two Lap Runners* (1994) and *Vibrator* (2003), as well as melodramas such as *April Bride* (2009) and *Crying 100 Times: Every Raindrop Falls* (2013).

In *Kabukicho Love Hotel* the concerns in Hiroki's previous works still make themselves felt, but there is also a certain focus on ordinary people and their lives, and even an attempt to deal with broader social problems, which is welcome.

The film is an ensemble of stories about people in some way connected to a love hotel—an establishment where rooms are rented either by the hour or by the night—in Tokyo's notorious Kabukicho red-light district. It takes place over 24 hours and, while overall the many coincidences strain credulity, each character's circumstances in and of themselves ring true. One is therefore inclined to see it as an artistic attempt at depicting a cross-section of life in the metropolis, and some artistic liberties toward that end are understandable.

A young man, Toru (Shota Sometani), is the manager of the place, having been laid off from a five-star hotel where he previously worked. He is ashamed of admitting this to his family, who live in Japan's earthquake- and tsunami-stricken northeast, or his

girlfriend Saya (Atsuko Maeda) from whom he borrowed money to go to hospitality college.

Things get complicated when Saya, an aspiring musician down on her luck, comes to Toru's hotel with a producer, hoping to sleep her way to success in her career. As if that were not enough, Toru's young sister also appears, with a film crew. Having tried and failed to work her way through college, she has apparently turned to making pornography.

Of the numerous characters whose lives are intertwined, Heya (Lee Eun-woo), a Korean call girl, is particularly memorable. She is trying to save enough money to open a business back in Korea, and lives with a Korean boyfriend who is suspicious about her work. She tells him she is a hostess. In one especially effective scene, Heya walks down the street just as an ultra-right, anti-Korean protest is going on, at the same time as an opposing demonstration. Her distress is palpable, and the depravity of the far-right slogans is successfully brought out.

Human relations, including the most intimate ones, are thoroughly corroded in the big city, which attracts and exploits human material across national borders—that seems to be one implied message. While the *Kabukicho Love Hotel* concludes with something resembling a happy ending, one is reminded more than anything of Engels' words: “But the more the hetaerism [extramarital intercourse] of the past is changed in our time by capitalist commodity production and brought into conformity with it, the more, that is to say, it is transformed into undisguised prostitution, the more demoralizing are its effects.”

Tsili* and *Theeb

Two markedly less successful films were *Tsili* by Amos Gitai and *Theeb* by Naji Abu Nowar.

Gitai's *Tsili* takes on the important and potentially explosive subject of the fate of Jews in Ukraine during World War II, and then manages to avoid completely examining any serious historical or social issues involved. Nor is any relevance to the present day established.

Without having read the eponymous novel by the Holocaust survivor Aharon Appelfeld, on which *Tsili* is based, I am unfortunately unable to compare the book and the movie. However, the film on its own is disappointing.

A Jewish woman, Tsili, is hiding in a forest in western Ukraine in the midst of the wartime carnage, or so we learn from the catalog notes. From what goes on the screen, on the other hand, the story could be happening anywhere, and at almost any time. For the first hour or so there is almost no plot or character development. Another Jewish refugee, Marek, stumbles upon Tsili's forest nest, and joins her for a time, but there's little dialogue and we learn next to nothing about them.

All of a sudden, Tsili is alone again, and from there the film toboggans towards its end through symbolic depictions of Jewish suffering and exile. Nothing having been clearly raised, nothing is clearly concluded. Self-conscious formal experimenting—such as having two (or three) actresses play Tsili, for no compelling reason and to no particular effect—cannot conceal the undeveloped, insubstantial character of the work.

The WSWS comment five years ago about Gitai's evolution remains valid: "It has been a while since Gitai, a talented and influential filmmaker, has been able to get out of himself. His films increasingly lack spontaneity and vitality. Whatever personal and artistic issues may be involved, there is little doubt that a central problem remains his refusal to confront directly the disaster that Zionism has proven to be, for Arabs and Jews alike."

Nowar's *Theeb* is another film that takes place in a potentially intriguing setting, with enormous pertinence, but proceeds to boldly ignore it all and falters badly.

During World War I, Theeb is the youngest son of a late chief of a Bedouin tribe somewhere on the Arabian Peninsula, then controlled by the Ottoman Empire. His older brother agrees to guide a British officer on an unrevealed mission through the desert. Theeb surreptitiously follows them, but becomes involved in more than he can handle.

In 2014, the major imperialist powers are ratcheting up their war drive in the Middle East, and British imperialism is once again setting its sights "east of Suez." The director Abu Nowar, of mixed British and Jordanian background, chose to ignore all of this, saying after the screening that he was not interested in political or historical implications. Instead, he wanted to focus on "the boy's perspective" and "his feelings."

In his statement in the festival catalog, Abu Nowar writes of a "moral dilemma that formed the initial idea for *Theeb*. What would happen if you were stranded with your worst enemy but needed their help to stay alive? How would this relationship develop?"

Limiting the scope to the personal and moral, while using the historical context as mere background, will hardly produce a work of a lasting impact. At one point in his talk, Abu Nowar also implied that the Ottomans bore as much, if not more responsibility than the British for the backwardness of the Arab world, displaying serious historical disorientation.

The director's feature debut is visually pleasing and one can see a lot of effort went into *Theeb*. One can only hope that Abu Nowar, and certainly not he alone, will broaden his artistic outlook and grapple more seriously with important historical issues, not least of which is the role of imperialism and various nationalisms in the Middle East.

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