



***Asa ga kuru (True Mothers)* is a prospective future LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd.**

17 of a possible 20 points = **1/2 = a minor classic**

Japan 2020 color 140 minutes subtitled live action feature drama

"Asa Ga Kuru" Film Partners / Kino Films Kumie / Kazumo

Producer: Yumiko Takebe a Film Movement dvd release

**Key: * indicates an outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

Points:

- 2 Direction: Naomi Kawase***
- 2 Editing: Tina Baz, Roman Dymny, and Yōichi Shibuya**
- 1 Cinematography: Naoki Sakakibara and Yūta Tsukinaga**
- 2 Lighting: Yasuhiro Ota***
- 2 Screenplay: Naomi Kawase and Izumi Takahasi based on the 2015 novel by Mizuaki Tsujimura**
- 1 Music: Akira Kosemura and An Ton That**
- 2 Production Design: Setsuko Shiokawa***
- Costume Design: Miwako Kobayashi**
- Makeup: Naoko Koizumi**
- 2 Sound Design: Roman Dymny***

Sound Editing: Arnaud Rolland

Sound Recording: Eiji Mori and Roman Dymny

Sound Mixing: Olivier Goinard

2 Acting

1 Creativity

17 total points

Cast: Hiromi Nagasaku* (Satoko Kurihara), Arata Iura (Kiyokazu Kurihara), Aju Makita* (Hikari Katakura), Reo Sato (j) (Asato Kurihara), Hiroko Nakajima* (Takako Katakura), Tetsu Hirahara (Masaru Katakura), Ren Komai (Misaki Katakura), Taketo Tanaka (Takumi Aso), Gō Rijū (Takeshi Hamano), Miyoko Asada* (Shizue Asami), Munetake Aoki* (yakuza collector), others

Another fine, deeply moving drama from Japanese director Naomi Kawase, *Asa ga kuru (True Mothers)* uses its two hour twenty minute runtime to explore the core attributes of motherhood. This thematic material holds great fascination for the auteur, as she was abandoned by her mother very early in her life and raised by a related elderly couple. She apparently had a rather contentious relationship with this adopting great-aunt, perhaps because such a senior citizen couldn't successfully fulfill the physical role of a younger mama. In this film, two mothers are examined closely. One is married to a sexually dysfunctional spouse. The other is a teenage girl whose boyfriend has been forcibly cut off from social interaction with her by parents and teachers.

Hikari Katakura, at age fourteen, develops a crush on an athletic boy named Takumi Aso who conveniently attends her school. He's interested in her as well. Yet his motive for isolating her from other friends is unclear. Though their initial meeting is confused and quite tentative, the pair eventually proceed to sexual engagement, a condition with consequences neither is prepared to handle. Hikari becomes pregnant, interfering with parental plans for her to continue academic studies. Instead, she is shipped off to Baby Baton's home for unwed mothers-to-be on an offshore island near Hiroshima. There she finds love and encouragement from the institution's founder and chief operational agent, Shizue Asami.

Baby Baton is an organization developed to pull together babies born out of wedlock with adoptive parents who cannot create families on their own. It

advertises on Japanese television, attracting the notice of a high-rise apartment dwelling couple in Tokyo who have been unable to start a family due to the husband's azoospermia. Attempts to bypass this difficulty through surgery have failed, leaving Satoko and Kiyokazu Kurihara frustrated and childless. Baby Baton seems to offer a possible solution.

Attending an orientation class in Tokyo for interested spouses considering adoption of a baby, the Kuriharas meet several families who have successfully adopted through Shizue Asami's agency. Favorably impressed by what they see and hear, they are apparently even willing to meet Shizue's requirement that one adoptive parent must stay at home full-time to care for the adoptee. An additional stipulation of Baby Baton is adoptive parents get to name the adopted child. In this case, the infant boy is going to be called Asato, which can mean "sky," "calm," "gateway," or "rising sun." Apparently the Kuriharas intend it to signify "radiance" and "brightness," two connotations related to solar ascent.

It turns out Hikari's newborn is available at just the right moment to fulfill their quest for family enlargement.

When they meet with the disconsolate teen and her parents to finalize legal transfer of guardianship, the girl presents Satoko with a sealed envelope containing private wishes with regard to the baby. Hikari's obviously heart-shattered to surrender her offspring to strangers. But with Takumi's family and her own both resolutely opposed to nurturing it adoption is the sole remaining humane choice. Neither furtive abandonment nor foisting the youngster off on grandparents is a viable option in this particular case.

So far, nothing in the plot indicates any special mystery. That will develop later, when Hikari moves to Tokyo after learning through file snooping at Baby Baton's haven for pregnant girls that the Kuriharas reside in that city. Sometime afterwards a desperate young female co-worker named Tomoka gets hired by the same newspaper delivery company where Hikari has found employment. She eventually forges her roommate's signature as co-guarantor on a Yakuza loan. This false friend then takes French leave. Afterwards, Hikari finds a supposedly lucky yellow slicker and a handful of coins left behind for her in their shared apartment.

It appears she uses the money to pay off two Yakuza collectors, then attempts to blackmail the Kuriharas by demanding either they return their

adoptive son to her or fork over a cash “ransom” of sorts. Showing up at their flat, she arrives dressed partly in Tomoka’s clothes, with painted lips, dyed hair, and darkened eyelashes courtesy of Tomoka’s previous styling assistance. Shades of *Vertigo* here. If satisfaction is not guaranteed her, Hikari will inform everyone at Asato’s school, as well as neighbors and Kiyokazu’s employer the Kurihara heir-to-be is no blood relation to his parents. Which is pathetically absurd, since the Kuriharas have done as Baby Baton and Hikari herself requested, reading the girl’s own note about his origins to Asato and communicating to everyone at work and at the lad’s school his status as an adoptee.

Is Hikari attempting to recover cash shelled out to the mobsters this way? What has become of Tomoka? These questions are left unanswered and pose the real puzzle of this film. Perhaps Mizuki Tsujimura provided solutions to them in her source novel?

Naomi Kawase’s point is the process by which motherhood unfolds, or doesn’t.

Satoko first acquires maternal habits by comforting a husband who felt abnormal and inadequate in that role. She then applies the same sympathy and non-judgmental support to Asato after he’s unfairly accused of accosting a peer on a jungle gym.

Takako Katakura, Hikari’s mother, is quite the opposite. A “natural” mom, she lacks the patience, compassion, and listening skills a “true” mother possesses. When problems arise, such as a surly daughter and an unexpected teenage pregnancy, Takako resorts to physical violence, setting an extremely poor example of parenting to Hikari. Her constant praise of elder daughter Misaki as a role model screams favoritism, at least to the mind of child number two. Director Kawase would probably categorize Takako as a mother in name only, therefore a “false mother.” The equivalent of a counterfeit parent.

Hikari, badly in need of a responsive maternal figure uncovers one only by leaving her biological family. It is a surrogate mama, resident on a sparsely populated island that first supplies her with the love, guidance, and self-respect she needs. Shizue Asami is a “real mother” to her wayward girl refugees, including Hikari. Much more so than the ones who birthed them. Perhaps on the principle of “passing it forward,” Hikari will befriend and commiserate with the rejected Tomoka, who has been effectively thrown aside from her own family.

In paying off Tomoka's debt, she assumes the role of "mother" to her. Hikari will reinforce that status on her final visit to the Kuriharas when she confesses her shame at stooping to confrontational extortion. Like a "true" mother, she goes away empty-handed, leaving her son with a family that can far better provide for his physical, social, and intellectual needs.

In the film's final scene, a transformative recognition occurs as Satoko and Hikari truly comprehend each of them is a genuine mother in the best sense of that word, sacrificing self-pity and potential monetary compensation for the sake of someone else's future and security. Satoko has relinquished a second household salary and her claim to be a "working woman" to nurture a child. Hikari has finally decided to set aside a "natural right" to sole possession of her son in favor of sharing him with others who are perhaps equally invested in his well-being.

Insuring the film's impact as a vehicle for redefining "motherhood" are estimable performances by eighteen-year-old Aju Makita as socially battered yet ultimate survivalist Hikari, Miyoko Asada as patroness and protector of society's misguided and naive young girls, and Hiromi Nagasaku as affectionately mediating Satoko, who must try to heal and repair two fractured families in critical need of recovering self-respect. Arata Iura is excellent, too, as a man plagued by a physical curse not of his own devising, one which lowers his social status until chance viewing of the Baby Baton television documentary catapults him out of a sinkhole of depression. Munetaka Aoki brings strong support as a sneering Yakuza thug. So does Hiroko Nakajima, portraying a wife and mother so addicted to social approbation she will destroy her younger child's self-esteem completely rather than compromise one fraction on her own ambition to secure the stubbornly recalcitrant adolescent, however unwillingly, a college education. Gō Riju, whose face misleadingly resembles that of Puddleglum in the BBC adaptation of C. S. Lewis's *The Silver Chair*, movingly embodies charitable concern of Takeshi Hamano for the abused and impoverished women who constitute most of his newspaper delivery workforce.

Cinematography alternates between landscapes, cityscapes, and documentary footage, managing to combine all three in a satisfying whole.

Contrasts between the quiet serenity of nature at Shizue's pastoral retreat and the hubbub at a Tokyo airport or on a city kindergarten playground prove quite effective in grabbing viewer interest.

Music is adequate and as low-key as the bulk of action depicted. Roman Dymny's sound design adds considerably to the film's charm and verisimilitude to reality.

The screenplay devised by Naomi Kawase and Izumi Takahashi quite formidably steers audiences through an initially unsettling series of flashbacks, bringing about at last more illumination than murkiness. This despite several unresolved questions left for viewers to puzzle over, as already mentioned above.

Yasuhiro Ota's lighting is gorgeously transparent throughout, making the most of ocean views, falling cherry blossoms, and sun-drenched glades, the latter being especially memorable as sites of youthful hikes and budding romance.

Editing manages to tie together triumphantly a trio of plot strands, the first of which focuses on Kiyokazu's reproductive failure, a second detailing Satoko's trusting relationship with Asato, and a third spotlighting setbacks and poor decisions afflicting Hikari. Slow pacing allows for greater insight into character, which reaps huge dividends in the final product.

Naomi Kawase once again demonstrates superior ability to direct performers and select material which inspires and rewards those who seek it out.

True Mothers is heavy with adult themes and contains dreamy adolescent nudity making it unsuitable for viewers under the age of eighteen. For adults, it is a complex, upbeat assertion of real family values finding expression amid conflicting traditional customs and increasingly abysmal intergenerational communication gaps, a dilemma crippling societies throughout the modern world. Not just Japan.

Special features on this dvd simply aren't actual bonuses. A twenty-four minute short titled *Retour à Toyama (Return to Toyama)* is a dreary, pointless exercise in contentless filmmaking. It's directed by Atsushi Hirai and filmed in color. This reviewer gives it a rating of six points, which is equivalent to *1/2. It is not at all recommended to anyone. See below for more details.

The other extra is a seventeen-minute subtitled interview discussion between actress Juliette Binoche and director Naomi Kawase. The main topic is

Kawase's methods of dealing with her technical crew, something which rises to prime importance if reports of physical assault during the filming of *Asa ga kuru* are genuine. It seems many of the original technicians departed due to aggressive conduct on someone's part. The two principals involved offer differing accounts of what happened. This featurette is perhaps intended to assure those watching such an incident won't recur in the future.

In short, neither of these "bonuses" add anything to the release. Skip them. You won't miss anything vital or enlightening.

Retour à Toyama (Return to Toyama)

6 of a possible 20 points = $\frac{1}{2}$ = a very dull movie Japan 2020 color 24'
subtitled live action (???) short (Live inaction is what you see.)

Producers: Martin Bertier and Damien Manivel

Points:

- 0 Direction: Atsushi Hirai
 - 1 Editing: Jehan Folque Though pacing is sluggish.
 - 1 Cinematography: Benoit Pain Not too bad to look at, but ... (See below.)
 - 2 Lighting This is the picture's main asset.
 - 0 Screenplay: Atsushi Hirai This is the picture's biggest downfall.
 - 1 Art Direction Outstanding, if you like grunge. Otherwise, just adequate.
 - 1 Sound This is adequate.
 - 0 Acting The screenplay provides nothing for actors to do or say that is meaningful.
 - 0 Creativity Completely absent.
 - 0 Ambience Not a hint of it anywhere.
- 6 total points