

Critique

Pradip Biswas

Repeat Grand Prix for Director Sho Miyake



Two Seasons, Two Strangers posters a narrative as to how her own story runs in a beguiling Japanese diptych! The film has earlier won the best Locarno laurel for its smart and grotesque use of technique to present the film; the film is novel in that the director deviates from a routine structure and lines of metabolism! The same film wins the Grand Prix at 30th IFFK Kerala this year. In other words, Shô Miyake's Locarno winner probes the deeper overflowing impact of modest encounters in an elegantly structured miniature that spills out from a writer. A quicker show indeed!

Japanese director Shô Miyake experimented an art house breakthrough with his over-plush, unconventionally postering, boxing film said to be “Small, Slow but Steady.” Two features later, that title looks more and more like an announcement of Miyake’s own filmmaking credo. All three adjectives apply to his latest, *Two Seasons, Two Strangers* though it’s more jagged and ludic, peculiar than that description might imply on its surface. It clings to reorienting the viewer as it shifts from a contemplative film-within-a-film — depicting a fleeting connection between two strangers in a seaside

village; it may be called—to the equally low-key reality of that film’s skittish, adventure-seeking writer, "It’s a tale light on incident but rich, per its title, in doublings, parallels and reflective surfaces, layered to entrancing, cumulatively moving effect”.

In treatment, the fact is that Sho Miyake’s latest work (*Tabi to Hibi* in Japanese) is based on two manga may cause some misunderstandings. It is said the manga author is Yoshiharu Tsuge, whose work is subtle and idiosyncratic, meaning it doesn’t adhere to the kind of exaggerated theatrics that most manga deal in. Both stories take place in Tsuge’s native Hokkaido, but are quite different, not in tone so much as in narrative presentation. The first one is framed as a writing assignment by a screenwriter, Li (Shim Eun-Kyung), who has been hired to adapt one of Tsuge’s stories for the screen. We watch her struggle to make the proper changes and then see the end result, meaning the film the script turns into, which is about two young people (Yumi Kawai, Mansaku Takada) getting to know each other on a secluded, dead stretch of beach over during the summer. What happens in this film-within-a-film is less significant than what happens after the film is screened at a university where Li is the guest who fails to answers the students’ questions about it. Ush film is called “mirror construction” film; She is invited by a film studies professor (Shiro Sano) who later encourages her to visit Hokkaido to see the place that Tsuge was writing about, since she’s never been there.

The second half is prefaced by a tragedy that spurs Li to foray into a journey on her own, and it becomes clear as she disembarks from the train into the snow-

bound resort town that she isn’t much of a traveler. In her hectic posture, having not made any reservations she can’t find a place to stay and is forced to trudge halfway up a mountain to an inn that looks as if no one has stayed there in decades. It has eerie touch! There is only occupant, a reticent middle-aged man named Benzo (Shinichi Tsutsumi) who, at first, seems put out by Li’s entreaties to let her stay, but soon it becomes apparent that he just isn’t used to having people around, and as the host-guest relationship develops into cobweb we learn a little about the way his mind works, and he seems willing to let Li write about him. In fact, it sounds just like something Tsuge would write, and I guess it is.



Miyake isn’t much for vivid expression, and the film’s slow pace and undercurrents of melancholy can have a narcoleptic and contra effect. Moreover, the dialogue, which often fades into philosophical musings, surmises, feels unnatural, especially for a film that is mostly about how we observe human interaction. In the end, when Benzo is questioned by the police about something he claims he didn’t do you feel as if the movie is about to say something, but it turns into a red herring. Life

is like that, I suppose, but life isn't always interesting or cheerful?

Berlin, Cannes, and Venice are considered the major European film festivals, holding on to a level of world renown rarely afforded to such institutions. While unaware of meaning to question their importance, it's worth noting that they are far from the only celebrations of cinema happening around the Old Continent or brave world nor are they the ones most welcoming to the challenging and the *avant-garde*. Rotterdam has them beat on that account, not to mention more non-fiction-focused events and of course, the Locarno Film Festival. With their propensity for honoring *cinéastes* like Pedro Costa, Albert Serra, and Wang Bing, the Swiss fest will always pinge to capture the attention of more conventional-minded *cinéphiles*, but it is believed they deserve some love and mental aid. Indeed, it's about time we counted the *Golden Leopard* on par with the Bear, the Palme, the Lion.

To be upfront Shô Miyake, the fifth Japanese filmmaker, to take Locarno's highest prize. And after all that talk about audacious artistry, it's worth noting that *Two Seasons, Two Strangers* is hardly radical or path-breaking!. Nevertheless, it parades a rigorous, sweating and moving stance; it, occasionally looks humorous and feel at the toll of loneliness through a graceful feat of *mise en scene* wonder.

The foreign critic Guy Lodge deems it “the most uncinematic art form”. Writing, in all its permutations, would be anybody's bet. After all, it's hard to make the matter of putting words into a blank page something visually dynamic, no matter the craft or floridness of one's *découpage*. Shô

Miyake's *Two Seasons, Two Strangers* starts by facing this challenge head-on and, in some ways, challenging the audience in return!

Virtually the film begins in the urban jungle of modern-day Japan, blocks-of-buildings flattened by Yuta Tsujinaga's camera into something halfway between abstract geometry, cubic nuance and a patchwork quilt, asphalt, sun-facing windows, and telephone lines.....

Within one of those buildings, Li despairs over her desk. The plot is somewhat She's a Korean expat in Japan, working as a screenwriter for film and TV, currently tasked with adapting a manga by Yoshiharu Tsuge. Miyake's presentation is almost bristling in its opaque shade, we form, lingering on actress Shim Eun-kyung as she pantomimes the writer's struggle and self-doubt.

It may be said that it has aborted gestures aplenty, she moves her hands around and almost seems to contemplate a faraway mirage only she can see. When an idea is concrete enough to grasp, pen finally connects paper and a script blossoms on the page. Is it metaphorical? One doubts?

Initially, the scene is dry and direct, clean in that manner, which inspires critics to mention Bresson. This is over statement as Bresson is different kind of director and it is tough for Japanese director to borders on Bresson whose films are cubic in a sense and makes us ponder within deeply to know oneself?

It doesn't last long, though, for we soon plunge into the scene described by Li, and find a young woman waking up on the backseat of a car. A summertime sadness suffuses the screen, inspired by both verbal description and visions that paint the screen.

From a flurry of green as the car drives past country landscapes to turquoise waves crashing into the shore, *Two Seasons, Two Strangers* exchanges minimalism for an impressionistic rush. Through it all, no matter how evocative the images may be, Li's words still describe the frame in voice-over. The mechanism becomes especially interesting when deployed as a means of characterization.

The film appears to have an iota of surprises! In this regard, it gives the audience access to interior lives that neither acting nor direction is eager to declare. That's true of the girl, named Nagisa, and a boy, called Natsuo, two lonely souls whose inability to connect extends to their film's audience, who must be told their feelings rather than intuit them by more traditional dramatic means. Since this is a movie, they must cross paths, drawn to each other across the seaside village turned tourist trap. If not by fate, it's the writer's will that moves them into the most disaffected meet-cute you ever did see.

Says Shô Miyake, "My film is made in a manner that everyone can relate to and the societal toxic environment". You'll not confuse their walks and conversations for a Rohmerian stroll, as Nagisa and Natsuo are lost in themselves, trapped by the solipsism of their elegiac sadness even as they find wee solace in each other's company. They are mirrors and, more importantly, doubles, displaying a structural and thematic shape that's present in the film's English-language title. Because *Two Seasons, Two Strangers* isn't just about a summer by the sea.

Other part of the film highlights a strange interlude, marked by a beloved professor's advice, his sudden death, and a

twin mourning his brother. The second season starts in the darkness of a tunnel, a *phantom train* carries the burned-out writer up the mountains in winter, as far away from the summering seaside as possible. A foreign critic says: "The blue water of her imagination is left behind for a blanket of white snow that threatens to efface the screen in absolute. That effacement may be what she's looking for. After all, Li wants to run away from words, to stand in the world and experience it without the nagging need to articulate it. But words are always there, inescapable, and Li's escape is futile. "

Often this critic is puzzled to watch cobwebby movement by the director which is his own, bizarre connection? Camera is handled in a crazy manner as to what to capture and what to ignore? The protagonist keeps looking at her surroundings with a voracious eye and a camera readily registers sources of inspiration for future work.

Nothing simply exists in her locus or vicinity, for it all mirrors shred of life to be cannibalized, digested, fantasised on the page. There's no malice there, mind you, and the film never contemplates her with any sort of moralistic critique. Instead, Miyake looks for the gentlest of comedy in his protagonist's predicament, pining on the latter half of *Two Seasons, Two Strangers* on her relationship with Benzo, the grumpy owner of the only inn in town with an available bed – or futon, as the case may be.

The place appears to be an anachronistic aberration, so old it looks displaced from a clumsy dream like some cosmic joke at Li's expense. Its owner isn't much different, full of idiosyncrasies beneath a gruff exterior bound to melt under the

warmth of an unlikely friendship. The film is often disturbing as it is trying to reach the end using patches of happenstances and incidents not often realistic?

Or it'd be so in a more sentimental exercise. But that's not what *Two Seasons, Two Strangers* means to be, preferring an oddball restraint that can easily tip over into poetic musings. Just as the film within a film was based on Yoshiharu Tsuge's "A View of the Seaside," its second movement draws from the author's "Mr. Ben and his Igloo." The most significant divergence from the source material comes in the bridging of the two interludes.

There's also the switch over of a mangaka for a screenwriter character whose internal conflicts are similarly irresolute and inconclusive and mardy; yet tied to the cinematic form in ways her comic book counterpart can't be as solid as possible!. Yet, to capture what she'd consider natural, the foreigner must design the shot around a personal truth, lost in translation between herself and the model.

His book is taken away, as are his sunglasses, eyes directed toward the sea to convey a wistfulness that doesn't match the discomfort the narrator describes from him. In essence, this moment shows the existence of two Natsuos, the real and the imagined by

whoever looks upon him. It has touch of persona of Bergman! It's another facet of solitude stemming from the essential unknowability of us all and the impulse to create fictions as our way of understanding the other. The photographer, considering Natsuo and Li contemplating Benzo, is the same note played twice.

And in juxtaposing all and sundry details, Miyake crystallizes a particular kind of loneliness – encountering the present in the past tense – like few other directors do today. That alone-ness should justify his Locarno triumph, even if other contenders were just as superlative or even more formidable.

The coda part of the film is not that lucid or clear-cut but more laced in balls of wools!

Beyond such notions, there's also the grace with which he suggests character, sometimes stilted and wobbly on the side of unfinished sketches, and an appeal to classical form that makes him stand apart from other *auteurs* with comparable preoccupations, gambits – Hong comes to mind as does Dupieux.

This critic feels all Grand Prix films stand out on top: not always. The current film under review appears so. *Two Seasons, Two Strangers* are good like the proverbial curate's egg: each way it jumps!

Pradip Biswas is a member of FIPRESCI.