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SPARE



Shown at this year's November edition of Tokyo Filmex, *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy*, a film which had won the Silver Bear Grand Jury prize in Berlin for its director Ryusuke Hamaguchi, took nearly ten months to reach Japan. By comparison, the Cannes winner for best screenplay and Fipresci press prize *Drive my Car* made it to Tokyo screens somewhat faster.

As the year ends, much has been written about the director and these two films, mostly overwhelming praise. *Wheel's* episodic structure resonates with that of his epic first feature, *Happy Hour*. Five women appear in the film; two in *Magic* (or something less reassuring), one in *Door Wide Open*, and two more in *Once Again*. They don't know each other, but belong to a social category with which the filmmaker seems comfortable: creative, cultural, and nostalgically marginal (the fantasy part). The women's mis/fortunes deftly, and yet searingly, serve the purpose of *mise-en-scène*. More than a great portraitist of contemporary Japanese women, Hamaguchi, Kiyoshi Kurosawa's former student, is a formalist who has constructed an extended comfort zone. He has taken us this year from Tokyo to Hiroshima to Sendai in a generic manner that either reveals the reality of his female characters as a social class, or rather as figures moved from shot to scene.

While the first episode, *Magic*, opens with a masterful sequence of a young model and a stylist talking in a taxi at night, over the course of a long drive on a freeway and its tunnels, an inevitable trope in his films, the other two are either on foot, on a bus or a train. *Once Again*, the most theatrical of the three, carries the burden of queer love lost never to be found again – only to recognize it in the face of the wrong

person. The second one, however, *Door Wide Open*, rather than *Eyes Wide Shut*, displays its good fortune through a remarkable performance by Katsuki Mori. At once financially modest, a mother who has returned to university, involved in an affair with a younger student whose petty pleading sees her attempt to ensnare a professor who had given him poor grades. The door is that of the literary prize-winning scholar, played by Toshiaki Toyoda stalwart Kiyohiko Shibukawa, who downplays his ability at projecting menace and lets the actress take control of the scene. The bond is such between the performers that Hamaguchi dares to try Ozu's cutting across the line in a shot/reverse shot dialogue about intimacy, by far less formally effective than trusting the actress as Hamaguchi appears to do in the closing scene. The cunning at work in Katsuki Mori's eyes, in a simpler shot, is a thing of beauty. During those three to four minutes, the film is actually coated with magic.

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