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# ‘A Far Shore’ Review: Sexist Exploitation in Poverty-Line Japan Gets a Searing Exposé With a Lyrical Edge

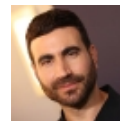
An underage mother in an abusive relationship slides toward prostitution in Masaaki Kudo's affectingly Mizoguchian modern-day tragedy.

By **Jessica Kiang** ▾



Courtesy of Karlovy Vary Film Festival

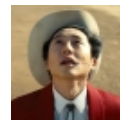
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“Okinawan kindness leaves no one behind!” goes the chirpy sign-off on a political radio commercial halfway through Japanese director [Masaaki Kudo](#)’s artful and affecting Karlovy Vary competition title, “[A Far Shore](#).” Already it plays like the bitterest irony. Aoi, a 17-year-old mother working illegally as a nightclub hostess in Okinawa, the poorest prefecture in Japan, listens with a dissociated look in her eyes: She has been left behind by practically everyone, and while Kudo’s film is deeply compassionate toward the struggling, stubborn, subjugated teen, this is an Okinawa of precious little kindness.

We first meet Aoi — rivetingly played by Kotone Hanase — at work with her lissome best friend Mio (Yumemi Ishida), also a minor, as the girls giggle, drink and flirt with a couple of guys in town for a good time. The customers congratulate themselves on their luck at being with girls so young, commenting ruefully that it would never be allowed in Tokyo. Technically, it’s not allowed in Okinawa either, but the clubs owners are willing to take the risk, knowing they can charge a premium for underage company.

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It means that this casual job, seedy as it is, pays better than anything else an unsupported, unskilled teen mother might be hired to do, and callow but willful Aoi, perhaps naturally a bit of a party girl anyway, seems to have some measure of fun doing it. Still, as she makes her way home at dawn, and wearily picks up her acutely sweet two-year-old Kengo (Tsuki Hasegawa) from her grandmother's, it's clear that whatever money she's making is not enough to keep her, Kengo and Masaya (Yoshiro Sakuma), her violent, alcoholic waster of a partner, in anything close to comfort. Their home is a squalid one-room apartment, with few places for Aoi to hide her wage packets away from Masaya's grasping gaze, and nowhere to hide herself away from his fists when his temper turns violent.

One such outburst, shot in unflinching, upsetting close-up, leaves Aoi so badly bruised and swollen that she cannot work the club anymore. And with financial pressures mounting after Masaya discovers her bathroom stash of cash, drinks it away and gets arrested in a barroom brawl, soon the only option left is sex work, which drives a wedge between her and Mio, and will finally lead to child welfare intervening on Kengo's behalf.

The relentless narrowing of opportunity that marks the film's downward trajectory must suggest this is a grueling, pummeling watch. But DP Takayuki Sugimura's photography displays a vibrancy and energy that belies the grim social critique, and can sometimes halo even the most sordid moments in an intensely moving, if desperate kind of exhilaration. When Aoi and the other underage hostesses flee a police raid on the club, despite the panic, the chase appears to us as though spiked with ecstasy, with the girls kicking off their shoes, clambering barefoot over walls and calling, laughing to each other in slow motion through

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tangles of whipping hair. They are poor, without prospects and in peril, but they are also young and lovely and, in this moment, drunk on booze and adrenaline and being alive.

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The soundtrack can be similarly counterintuitive, incorporating blasts of upbeat J-pop alongside Masamichi Shigeno's fascinatingly variegated score. Sentimental piano motifs, such as those that often mar Japanese melodramas, are suddenly elevated by haunting electro drones, and, during one spectacular shot of a lit-up city skyline, stabs of orchestral strings that lend a pivotal moment in Aoi's sad journey an almost operatic grandeur.

Still, miseries gather around the girl like detritus carried in by an inexorable tide — arguably too many miseries in the film's later stages, with Aoi sustaining blow after blow in a rhythm that occasionally feels manipulated for maximum pathos. This is not a film for the squeamish, the easily depressed or anyone who thinks that men have had a raw deal of it lately. The male characters here, to a man, are enragingly callous, self-centered and cruel, whether up close and personally as Masaya is, or casually, snickeringly so, like the clients in the club or Aoi's grinning, loathsome pimp.

This view of terrible men and the martyred women they exploit extends across generations. When Aoi goes to visit her estranged father and he briefly brushes the hair away from her face, remarking dispassionately that she looks like

her mother, it's hard to tell if the resemblance is in her features or in her bruises. Contrast that with a heartbreaking moment where Masaya's mother falls to her knees and begs Aoi's forgiveness for raising such a rotten son, or the scenes of giddy sisterhood with Mio, or even the firm but caring tone of the female social workers. What little Okinawan kindness and decency there is, is exclusively the province of women.

So "A Far Shore" is, in its politics, a very contemporary story. But centering the experiences of a sex worker striving to survive a succession of bad men is also firmly in the classic Japanese tradition of Kenzo Mizoguchi. It's no small thing to say that Kudo's film earns the comparison, through its clear-eyed, broken-hearted screenplay (co-written by Kudo and Mami Suzuki), and through Hanase's achingly empathetic performance. These assets make a tough watch also a tender one, dignifying a tawdry story to the status of a tragedy.

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A Far Shore, Karlovy Vary Film Festival, Masaaki Kudo

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**'A Far Shore' Review: Sexist Exploitation in Poverty-Line Japan Gets a Searing Exposé With a Lyrical Edge**

**Reviewed at Karlovy Vary Film Festival (Competition), July 6, 2022.  
Running time: 128 MIN. (Original title: "Tooi tokoro")**

**Production:** (Japan) An Allen production in co-production with The Fool. (World sales: Alpha Violet, Paris.) Producer: Yuki Kitagawa. Executive producer: Shunsuke Koga.

**Crew:** Director: Masaaki Kudo. Screenplay: Masaaki Kudo, Mami Suzuki. Camera: Takayuki Sugimura. Editors: Chen Shih Ting, Masaaki Kudo. Music: Masamichi Shigeno.

**With:** Kotone Hanase, Yumemi Ishida, Yoshiro Sakuma, Tsuki Hasegawa. (Japanese dialogue)

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