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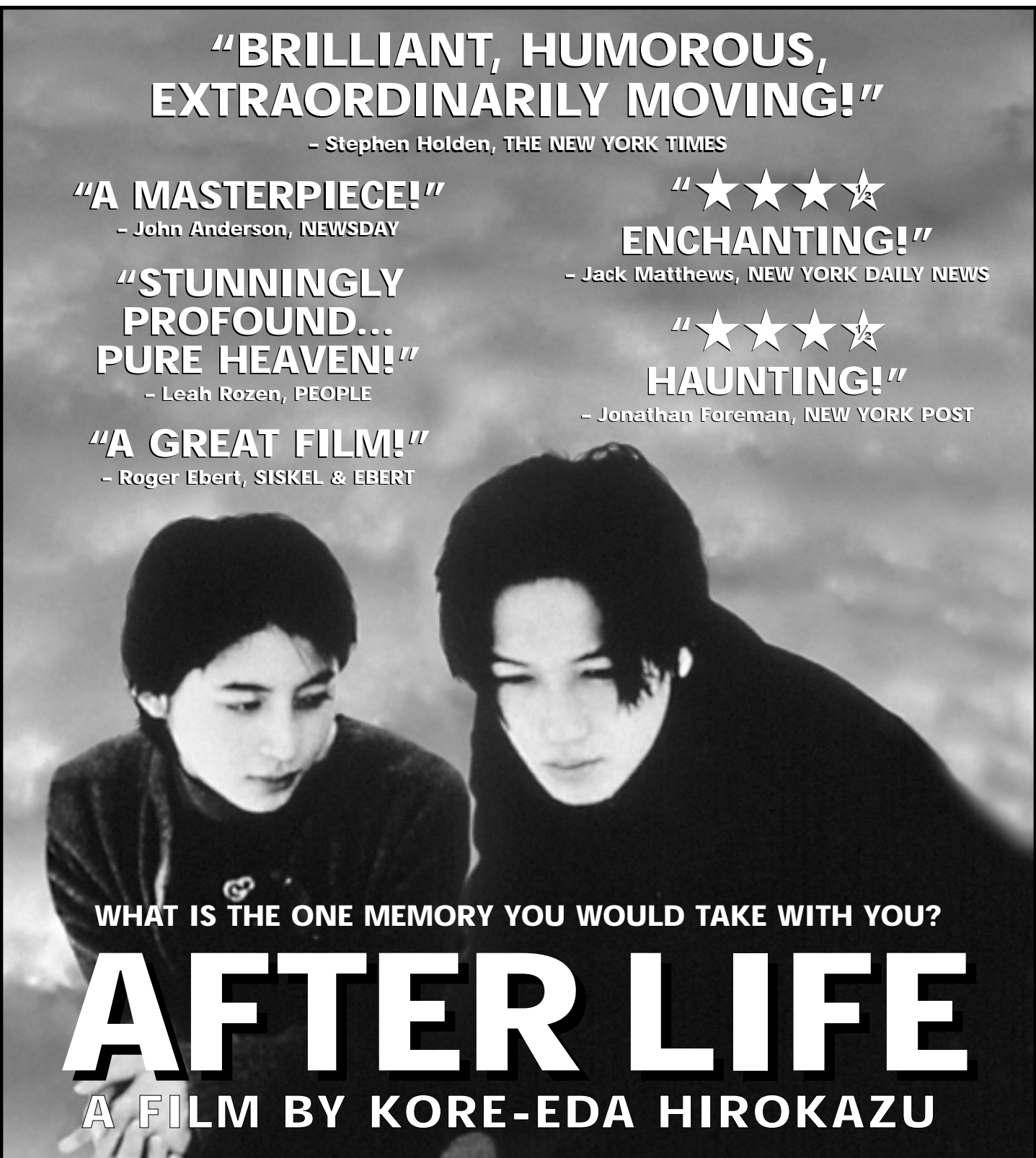
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WHAT IS THE ONE MEMORY YOU WOULD TAKE WITH YOU?

AFTER LIFE

A FILM BY KORE-EDA HIROKAZU

What if you had to choose one memory to take with you into the afterlife? This moving and original film is set at a way station between Heaven and Earth, where guides help the newly dead sift through their memories for a defining moment to take with them into eternity. From the director of "Maborosi."

JAPAN • 1999 • 115 mins • Color • In Japanese with English subtitles

'After Life': In Death, a Fond Remembrance of Things Past

STEPHEN HOLDEN

When we say "remember" something, what exactly is it we recall? A feeling? A smell? Words? Facial expressions? Invited to relive and especially happy memory, how many of us would be able to go beyond recalling how we felt, and describe the setting and circumstances of that moment in precise detail? And even when we conjure vivid mental pictures of past events, how accurate are they really?

These and other profound questions are the substance of Hirokazu Kore-eda's brilliant, humorous, transcendently compassionate film, "After Life." The Japanese director achieved international recognition four years ago with "Maborosi," an exquisitely photographed story of a young woman coming to terms with her husband's unexplained suicide.

Where that film found the very essence of sadness in the color, light and shadow of Japanese landscapes and in images of a world viewed from a distance through a screen of muted grief, "After Life" is a movie of ideas whose visual surface is deliberately mundane.

Set in a large, drab office building, "After Life" follows a week in the lives of a group of caseworkers, who at first appear to be harried cogs in a social service agency, and their weekly load of 22 new clients.

Soon it is revealed that this particular agency is no ordinary processing center but an agency that serves a special, extremely serious purpose. It is nothing less than a metaphysical way station whose clients are people of varying age and background who have just died.

One by one, they are assigned to caseworkers and told that they have three days to choose a particular memory to take with them into the next world. Once they have chosen, the staff will do its best to make individual home movies of those memories for the clients to take with them into eternity.

The immediate question that "After Life" stimulates is obvious: what memory would you choose? Would it be an erotic, gustatory, artistic or drug-enhanced moment of rapture? Or something more mundane like the memory of your head in your mother's lap? Or the exhilaration of a cool, clear summer morning?

As the clients sort through their memories, "After Life" becomes a quiet, extraordinarily moving and sometimes funny meditation on the meaning and value of life. It intimates that whatever happiness we may find in life comes

from within and is self-created.

There is a gentle, decrepit old woman whose fondest memory is cherry blossoms. There is an aviator whose happiest moments were spent flying through the clouds. The filming of his aeronautical impressions involves the kind of ingenious low-budget fakery that goes into the production of a grade school play.

There is also a little girl whose happiest memory is a ride at Disneyland. Told that 30 other children have chosen Disneyland rides, she is gently coaxed into coming up with something more original. And there is a defiant young man who refuses to make a choice.

The most complicated case involves Ichiro Watanabe (Taketoshi Naito), 70, a man who glumly remembers his dull, conventional life in an arranged marriage as unfulfilling. To jog his memory, his caseworker, Takashi Mochizuki (Arata), plays back excerpts from a file of year-by-year videotapes recording his life.

It emerges that Ichiro's wife was also Takashi's fiancée, and that the two men are the same age. Takashi died at age 20 in the Philippines and has been working at the processing center since then. He, like the other clerks, was unwilling to choose a memory and must remain in limbo until he decides on one.

"After Life" is as much a movie about filmmaking as it is about memory. For what are movies, after all, but larger-than-life dream images projected on celluloid? In its modest attitude about the ability of movies to replicate dreams, "After Life" is the opposite of bombastic Hollywood kitsch like "What Dreams May Come."

In capturing the essence of experience, it suggests, film is as imperfect and quixotic as memory. When we sort through our recollections to dredge bits and pieces of the past, the best we can hope to come up with are the mental equivalents of crude old videotapes.

But if the movies can't fully capture the magical power of dreams, making them is still valuable, cathartic activity. And when the time comes for the caseworkers and clients to make their movies, "After Life" buzzes with the



pleasurable excitement of an artistic workshop.

A striking aspect of "After Life" is its utter lack of grandiosity. Visually the film doesn't try to "poeticize" any of the memories with glossy travel brochure images or romantic music: life and death may be serious matters, but they are also business as usual.

Yet "After Life" has its own austere beauty in beautifully composed shots of silhouetted figures in bright doorways and other images that subtly portray the office as a metaphysical portal.

There are no heroes or villains, just caseworkers and quirky clients working together to assemble clues to the past and in doing so discovering meaning and value. What ends up mattering has little to do with material success and accomplishment and everything to do with having a sense of living in the moment, of belonging to the world and feeling truly and fully alive.

AFTER LIFE

Written, directed and edited by Hirokazu Kore-eda; directors of photography, Yutaka Yamazaki and Masayoshi Sukita; music by Yasuhiro Kasamatsu; produced by Shiho Sato and Masayuki Akieda. In Japanese with English subtitles. Running time: 118 minutes. This film is not rated.

With: Arata (Takashi Mochizuki), Taketoshi Naito (Ichiro Watanabe), Erika Oda (Shiori Satonaka), Susumu Terajima (Satoru Kawashima), Takashi Naito (Takuro Sugie) and Hisako Hara (Kiyo Nishimura).

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