

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2023/24 SEASON



BROKER

(Language: Korean)

Director: Hirokazu Koreeda, 2022. Running time: 129 minutes
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 6 March 2024.

“We're more like brokers than they are.”

“This nugget of insight comes from Sarge (Bae Doona), the older of two police detectives following around a group of people looking to sell a baby on the black market. Through a combination of ineptitude, sympathy for the tyke and just plain bad luck, the deals keep falling through and the cops have to take increasingly aggressive measures to see that the sale happens so they can make the arrest.

She and her younger companion (Lee Joo-young) have spent weeks living out of their car while casing and tailing the miscreants. They're tired and stinky, and eventually start putting their finger on the scales of justice to hurry things along. The baby brokers keep bumbling, and things go on from there.

If this sounds like a tense crime drama, it's not. *Broker* is an unapologetically sentimental story in which there are no bad guys — not even the two infant-sellers who snatched him away from baby box at a church, or the jaded young mother who abandoned him there. If anything, they become something like heroes as they travel around and form their own little ad-hoc family unit.

It's written and directed by Japanese director Hirokazu Koreeda, who made the absolutely wonderful *Shoplifters* a few years ago, one of my favorite foreign films of recent vintage. *Broker* is actually in Korean and stars Song Kang-ho, best known for playing the father in *Parasite*, which won a slew of awards including the Best Picture Academy Award. I thought it a fairly obvious (and inferior) imitation of *Shoplifters*.

Maybe Koreeda decided to join in the party rather than be miffed at the *Shoplifters* theft. *Broker* exists as a sort of companion piece to those other two films, as people engaged in criminal endeavors are fully humanized through the challenges faced together as a family unit.

Song plays Sang-hyeon, who runs a run-down little laundry shop and owes a bunch of money to the local mobsters in Busan. To get by he runs an occasional scam with Dong-soo (Gang Dong-won), the young man who works the night

shift at the church. They have one of those safe boxes for people to leave unwanted babies without risking criminal charges.

If a suitable candidate is dropped, Dong erases the video tape monitor and they find couples who want to find a baby on the black market. The going price is 10 million Korean won, or about \$8,000.

Clearly, they're not in this to get rich. They won't sell to just anybody, screening the prospective parents to make sure they're suitable. Dong was an orphan himself who was never adopted, and he uses some of the money he gets to help out his old orphanage, where he's treated as a living legend whenever he drops by.

When a little guy named Woo-sung is left, the duo think they have another easy score on their hands. But things grow complicated when the mother, So-young (Lee Ji-eun), turns up and insists upon accompanying the men on their excursion to find a suitable buyer. She had left a note with the baby promising to return one day, but hardly anyone ever does.

So is jaded and stubborn. She does not act in any kind of maternal way toward Woo-sung, leaving the cuddling and feeding duties to Dong and Sang, who become increasingly attached to the little guy. Not enough to want to keep him themselves, but it underscores their desire to find him a truly good family.

When Hae-jin (Im Seung-soo), a spunky kid from the orphanage stows away in Sang's laundry truck, it truly becomes a road trip story. They ride around from town to town, subtly sabotaging the potential purchases so things will keep going as they are. They stay in crummy hotels and eat cheap meals, and even share a joyful excursion to a carnival.

They become a family in everything but name.

Meanwhile, the story keeps cutting back to the cops following them, who act as a reminder that the group is committing a heinous crime, even if it is with good intentions, and things will not end in a happy place.

The main enjoyment in *Broker* is watching the actors channel their characters, each with their individual hang-ups and challenges, into a collaborative effort and grow the bonds between them. These anything-but-heartless criminals form their own familial bonds, and in a strange way the police become part of the clan.

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Despite their criminal association, Dong and Sang seem to hardly know each other, and truly become best friends during their trek. You won't be surprised that some moony glances pass between Dong and So. Hae acts as the adorable glue that helps connect them, a relentlessly cheerful kid who's determined to find a family even if he has to create it on the fly.

Sang might ostensibly seem like the father figure, but in some ways he's even more innocent and childlike than Hae. The longest and hardest journey is for So, who's seen untold pain and abuse in her life and is trying to do right by Woo-sung without getting too attached, and risk spreading her dark troubles to him.

I don't think *Broker* is on par with *Shoplifters*, but it's an uplifting tale leavened with notes of regret and longing. Family truly is where you find it."

Christopher Lloyd, *Film Yap* January 11, 2023.

“KORE-EDA GETS THE TONE ALL WRONG IN SUDSY KOREAN BABY ADOPTION TALE”

“Hirokazu Kore-eda can claim to be the greatest living Japanese film director, whose family dramas have marked him out as the heir to Ozu (although in an interview with me he said he preferred to be compared with Mikio Naruse). His work, including the Palme-winning *Shoplifters* (2018) is rightly revered. But he has always had a sweet tooth for whimsy and sentimentality, which I thought was on display in his much admired baby-swap drama *Like Father Like Son* (2013).

Now he has given us a sudsy road-movie heartwarmer set in Korea and inspired by the Korean phenomenon of “baby boxes” put out by churches for unwanted newborns. But the movie is fundamentally silly, with tiringly shallow characterisation and broad streaks of crime-drama intrigue, which only underline the fact that not a single word of it is really believable.

Korean actor Song Kang-ho (famed for starring in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*) plays Sang-hyeon, a volunteer at a local church that has a “baby box”. But he is running a “broker” scam: occasionally he steals a newborn for himself – erasing the church's CCTV footage that prove a baby was left there – and offers it for sale on the adoption black market, with potential couples lined up by his partner Dong-soo (Gang Dong-won), a former orphanage inhabitant with access to

information about potential adopters who want newborns rather than institutionalised toddlers. But their lives are made more complicated when young mother So-young (Lee Ji-eun), whose unwanted baby is taken and offered up for sale by these two tricksters, confronts them and instead of telling the police, insists on coming with them on their zany road-trip to interview potential parents. On their trail are a couple of cops, played by Bae Doona and Lee Joo-young.

Of course, in the real world, the people running such a nauseating scam would be creepy and loathsome individuals. And let's say they were claiming – as these two fictional characters are – that they were doing the world a service by sidestepping bureaucracy and dreary orphanage care by getting the babies quickly to adoptive parents and moreover handing over most of the fee to the mother, then this, too, would be highly suspect and naive. What sort of people might want to pay top dollar for a baby?

But the film presents the two as just lovable, flawed guys who are romantics at heart: tough cookie So-young even tells goofy young Dong-so that he needs to be more hard-hearted because sweet guys like him get eaten alive. The criminality of the proceedings is assigned to the mother, who turns out to have a shadier background than we at first assume. Of course, if anyone can sell such a dodgy premise it is that wonderful actor, Song Kang-ho, but his air of hangdog everyman decency can't solve the problems of naivety, implausibility and the sugary taste. It's a rare miss for Kore-eda."

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 23 February 2023

"Hirokazu Kore-eda uses arguably melodramatic plot structures to craft nuanced, delicate character studies. His focus throughout most of his career, but especially lately, has been on stories of unexpected families, and what that word even means. Is family the group you're born in or the one who cares for you, raises you and protects you? It's a theme of Kore-eda's going back to his masterpiece "Nobody Knows," but it's also reflected in excellent recent dramas like "Like Father, Like Son," "After the Storm," and his Palme d'Or-winning "Shoplifters." This year, he has quietly delivered the seemingly underrated "Broker," opening in limited release next week before expanding in early 2023.

In a crowded Cannes slate this year, "Broker" slipped under the radar, and it deserves a much bigger audience. This is a moving drama about people pushed together by fate who end up not merely helping each other survive but elevate through an increasingly harsh world.

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Kore-eda traveled to South Korea to tell this story, partly because that country more commonly uses something called “baby boxes.” But one suspects it’s also so he could work with the amazing Song Kang-ho (“Parasite”), who won Best Actor at Cannes. Song plays Ha Sang-hyeon, the owner of a laundry shop who volunteers at a local church. That’s where he works an unusual scheme with his friend Dong-soo (Gang Dong-won) as the two take the infants dropped off by mothers who cannot care for them. The pair sell the babies on the adoption market. Yes, “Broker” is a dramedy about child trafficking, but Kore-eda instantly wants you to question your judgment of his characters. Is it that much better for a baby to enter the Korean foster system than to be sold to a family who will love and care for it? “Broker” doesn’t directly address this question as much as let it hang in the air, reflecting how we will judge the characters moving forward.

Everything falls apart when a mother named Moon So-young (the phenomenal Lee-Ji-eun) returns to the church to get her baby back, stumbling onto the operation. At the same time, a pair of detectives named Soo-jin (Bae Doona) and Detective Lee (Lee Joo-young) follow this new crew of outsiders, discovering that not everything is as it seems.

“Broker” shouldn’t work. In the plot description alone, it sounds kind of ridiculous and almost insulting. And if one can’t get past its contrivances, especially in the final act, it won’t connect. However, I find it so refreshing when a filmmaker can use an old-fashioned melodramatic structure to connect emotionally. Kore-eda’s films, particularly this one, are perfect examples of what Roger Ebert was getting at when he wrote of film as an empathy machine. They’re not just asking you to walk in someone else’s shoes, but they’re demands for empathy for people you see daily. They’re requests for empathy not just for the people on the screen but for the makeshift families you have been surrounded by. He uses melodrama not merely to manipulate his audience but to shift your emotional center and to push away the cynicism and judgment of the world. He presents his characters with such compassion and understanding that we come to love them too. “This car is filled with liars,” says Dong-soo, and he’s not wrong, but how did they get to this point? Why have they lied? What does it say about where they’ve been and where they’re going?

It helps that Kore-eda’s hand with performance direction has only gotten better. Song is as good as one would expect—he’s literally never bad—but he’s not alone. Lee Ji-eun is the revelation, conveying how much the character has been thrust into a situation she could never have imagined without feeling like a pawn of the plot. She’s the heart of the story in that it’s how her character turns

from a young woman with no options to someone who finds her path through life. Kore-eda allows his emotion to build through his characters, and his ensemble gets that. If we don't believe their choices or emotions, the whole project falls apart.

Hirokazu Kore-eda understands that unimaginable life decisions aren't made easily. They're often made by people who have reached a fork in the road where neither direction felt like the right one. We're all stumbling through life at certain points. And it's the people we meet on the way, the ones who end up joining us, that keep us moving.”

Brian Tallerico, *Roger Ebert.com*, December 23, 2022.