The Third Murder

Director: Hirokazu Kore-eda
Country: Japan
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A review by Manohla Dargis for *The New York Times:*

Did he or didn't he is the question that's teased throughout the insistent, gripping "Third Murder." That's the case even if everyone seems to agree that the defendant is guilty: the defendant himself (he's confessed), the police, the prosecutor and the defense lawyer who at first only seems to care about the case not his client. Even the filmmaker seems to have boxed the defendant in: The movie opens with the defendant bashing in the victim's head and then burning the corpse. A trial seems almost beside the point, a view that the writer-director Hirokazu Kore-eda goes on to dismantle with lapidary precision.

Mr. Kore-eda is best known for his movies about families, including "Like Father, Like Son," a heart-shredding story about two boys swapped at birth. With a quiet, adamantly moral sensibility and unassuming yet exacting technique, he tells seemingly small stories that grow deeper and more emotionally complex one nuance at a time. His technique can be so unassertive that if you aren't paying attention you might not even notice it. He avoids pyrotechnics and look-at-me camerawork and editing, preferring to thicken and deepen his stories with suggestively revealing details: a critical word, gesture or glance. At times his emphatic discretion can verge on mannerism, but not here.

For Shigemori (Masaharu Fukuyama) the case seems fairly straightforward. His client, Takashi Misumi (Koji Yakusho), has confessed that he killed his former boss. Misumi was in prison for several decades for two other murders and will probably face the death penalty if he's found guilty. It all looks straightforward and fairly hopeless, but Shigemori sets off on his own investigation in an effort to reduce the charge and possibly save Misumi's life. He's aided by some employees (a decorative woman and two men, one seasoned and the other wide-eyed) and his father, a retired judge who presided over Misumi's previous murder trial.

Mr. Kore-eda is a smooth enough storyteller that this coincidence doesn't disrupt the flow too much. Instead, he pulls you along as Shigemori begins his inquiry, visiting the murder scene, rooting out witnesses and poking around in the past. Facts and faces begin piling up along with additional coincidences as daughters start to multiply. Misumi's adult daughter figures into the story somewhat obliquely as does Shigemori's pouty teenage daughter, Yuka (Aju Makita). She in turn becomes a strange twin to the murder victim's daughter, Sakie (Suzu Hirose), a lonely adolescent with a pronounced limp and plaintive mien who was curiously close with Misumi.

In contrast to the usual law and order tales, the more that Shigemori uncovers about the case the murkier everything appears. He pores over the evidence and grapples with enigmas, like the ashy crosslike shape where the body was found and a small, tidy animal grave that's been marked with its own cross. Again and again, he returns to the detention center where Misumi is being held, prodding and poking his client. Shigemori is seeking answers, and sometimes he gets them, though they don't necessarily shed light on the case, as when Misumi explains that the reason he paid his rent in advance even though he had planned on being arrested: "You don't pay rent in prison."

This observation is indicative of Mr. Kore-eda's humanizing of Misumi, a character who nevertheless remains satisfyingly slippery. He clearly committed the murder, as the story regularly reminds you. During his inquiries, Shigemori examines surveillance images recorded in a taxi after the murder: Nothing if not obliging, the blood-splashed Misumi politely asked to be driven to a police station. The back and forths between accused and lawyer are among the movie's most enthralling scenes, largely because the soft-featured Mr. Yakusho — lips lightly curling — can make a nice smile seem positively terrifyingly. (The actor probably remains best known to audiences in the United States for his charming star turn in the original version of "Shall We Dance?")

At times, Mr. Kore-eda pushes too hard and overstates the obvious, as when he superimposes images of Misumi and Shigemori's faces, as if to underscore that the two are more alike than not. He's making a fine ethical point but it's an overly blunt cinematic stroke. Far better is an earlier scene in which Shigemori and his daughter share little but a restaurant booth and their mutual estrangement. He's had to rescue her from some trouble and asks why she cried. She shows that she can weep on cue — and as Mr. Kore-eda, who uses close-ups with devastating results — fills the screen with her manufactured tears everything seems to crumble, Shigemori and the truth included.

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