

"Propulsive, vivacious, and emotionally rich"

A delicate portrait of late adolescence.

"One of the best movies of the year."







HAPPYEND













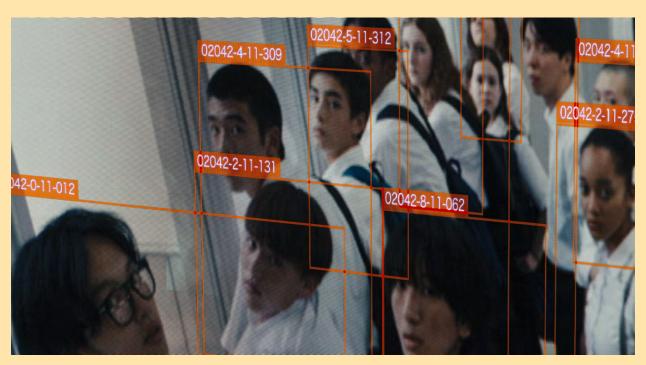




Cinema Inutile presents

A Zakkubalan, Cineric Creative, and Cinema Inutile Production In Association with K-Garage, Sons of Rigor Films, Spark Features, Purple Tree Content, and Giraffe Pictures





Written and Directed by Neo Sora

Starring: Hayato Kurihara, Yukito Hidaka, Yuta Hayashi, Shina Peng, ARAZI, Kilala Inori, Ayumu Nakajima, Masaru Yahagi, PUSHIM, Makiko Watanabe, Shiro Sano

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Short Synopsis

In a near-future Tokyo where the threat of a catastrophic earthquake pervades daily life, two rabble-rousing best friends are about to graduate high school. One night, they pull a consequential prank on their Principal, which leads to a surveillance system being installed in their school. Stuck between the oppressive security system and a darkening national political situation, the two respond in contrasting ways, leading them to confront differences they never had to face before.



Long Synopsis

Best friends Yuta and Kou are about to graduate high school in a near-future Tokyo where the threat of a catastrophic earthquake pervades daily life. One night, they pull a consequential prank on their Principal, which leads to a surveillance system being installed in the school. Between the oppressive security system and a darkening national political situation, Kou feels increasingly frustrated with the world while Yuta seems completely unaware.

Finding an empathetic ear in a passionate student activist, Kou's political consciousness blossoms. Assuming that Yuta would never understand his newfound interests, Kou begins to avoid his friend. For the first time in their lifelong friendship, the two are forced to confront differences that they never had expressed before.

A Conversation with HAPPYEND Director Neo Sora

By A.E. Hunt



The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What originally inspired you to make Happyend?

There are multiple sources of inspiration that all came together. One is the juvenile delinquent genre. I love Rebel Without a Cause and Taiwanese New Wave films like A Brighter Summer Day and Rebels of the Neon God. I coupled that with my own experiences during my youth.

Then there's a fact of life of living in Japan that you're reminded of pretty consistently, which is that in the near future, there's going to be a devastating earthquake that could potentially flatten the metropolis area of Japan. I started imagining what the world, and in particular, Japan, would be like in the near future, socially and politically. I was thinking about that as a metaphor for this world where pressure has been building and could blow at any moment. How would that pervasive fear affect people psychologically?

In Japan, big earthquakes have served as turning points in society. The most recent one of course was 3/11, in Fukushima, and the one that I researched extensively happened in 1923. That one sparked a genocide of Zainichi Korean people. Amidst the chaos of the earthquake, the Japanese government and regular people circulated false rumors, saying that Koreans were poisoning the wells. This led to the mass murder of Korean people in Japan as the rumors fed into the racism that had festered under colonialism. And to this day, whenever a significant earthquake happens, all these lies spread on social media about how foreigners are poisoning the wells. It's a racist pattern of the Japanese populace.

The third influence, I guess, would be my personal memory of my high school and university days. 3/11, Fukushima, was my political awakening, and as I started to grow more politically

aware, I had a lot of experiences where I would cut friends off because they were apolitical, or I was angry at them. I've had friends cut me off due to my politics as well. I really wanted to preserve those feelings, all those tensions, both political and in friendship.



I think a lot of people are going through that right now. This brings me to the title, which I interpreted as an end to things and people in our life that we've become accustomed to but aren't good for us.

Originally the title was Earthquake. When we were editing the film in January, there was a bigish earthquake in the Noto peninsula of Japan. I always had reservations about calling it Earthquake because the film doesn't really deal with the trauma of disaster, and that trauma is really significant for people in Japan. I was searching for other titles and I came to Happyend, which I thought captured the feeling at the end of the movie really well. The words happy and end, they're not oxymorons necessarily, but they have antagonistic feelings to them. I think there's the sense of dread and doom that pervades the film. But I also wanted to show the joy and energy of youth.

You employ a framing device throughout where we only see certain conflicts from the point of view of characters watching from afar. The friends speculate about what each other is saying from a distance.

That device where some of the characters "ADR" others is not necessarily something that I did with my friends. But actually something Aiko [Masubuchi, Producer] did and my other producer and editor, Albert and I expanded upon. It functions to mask the exposition that's happening in those conversations. I'm always thinking about how brilliant films do exposition in a beautiful way.

There's a lot that you have to explain in this film, and I was thinking about different ways to not make things sound too explanatory or expository. In these scenes, the characters are actually setting up a lot of the conflict for you, but in a way that's funny and still grounded in what they'd be doing as friends. Then I realized it adds another layer of complexity and subjectivity, because the characters are also projecting their own desires of what they want them to be talking about.

You play a lot with practical lights in the film. For example, the man bumping his head on one in the restaurant, or the light that swings from the ceiling and allows us to watch an interaction between Yuta and Kou playout in the shadows. We also watch a lot of action playout in reflections.

The DP in this film is Bill Kirstein, who I've been working with for a really long time. He shot my first short film, The Chicken and also Ryuichi Sakamoto | Opus, a concert film. He also shot the new Mean Girls movie, but also loves Béla Tarr and everything in between. Bill has a wide range. We work together really well, and he shares all of my references, so it's super easy to communicate with him about my ideas. The dangling light is there to heighten the idea that the world is shaking. For Yuta and Kou, their friendship is so foundational to their being and as their friendship gets shaky, so does the world around them. The two friends are like tectonic plates that shift and shake. [With the lighting] in the club, I'm trying to represent the fact that their friendship is unstable. Since the earthquake could come at any moment in the film, one way that I wanted to show that was through shadow and light.



I noticed the name of the actual school location in the credits. Can you talk about the logistics of finding that and other locations?

Though the film is set in a fictionalized Tokyo, we shot the film mostly in a city called Kobe. Tokyo is notorious for being difficult to shoot in. So, for fairly large scale shoots, it's pretty common for people to go to different cities. And the Kobe Film Office [the city's film

commission] is extremely good at what they do and welcoming. Kobe is also pretty compact as a city compared to Tokyo, so it's easy to move around in.

It's fairly common knowledge within the Japanese film industry that real schools are basically impossible to get approval to shoot in. So, for a long time we were looking for sets. But most of the set schools are quite old or in the countryside, and every window you shoot through has a forest in the background. None of them worked. Then, the Kobe Film Office approached the Kobe Municipal High School of Science and Technology and Kobe Municipal Kobe Engineering High School, and they welcomed us with open arms.

One of our requirements was that the school would have to let us bring a crane in and put the car up [for a scene in which the kids flip the principal's beloved luxury car on its rear]. The usual reaction to that ask was, "Are you kidding me?" But because they're a science and technology school, their answer was, "Oh, awesome, how are you planning on doing that?" And they have a whole garage setup because they have engineering students who work on cars, so they were totally cool with it. And a bunch of students even helped with the set decoration. In the Music Research Club room, a lot of the graffiti was actually done by the high school students. And the school had the concrete look to it that I was looking for.

The locations were also very important to me because something we knew that we wanted to do was to close the aperture of the lens so that there's a lot of depth of field. We didn't want an overly shallow look to the image. I love seeing all the details of the world by having everything in focus because we had amazing locations where there was so much to see. Even though it's an intimate story about two friends, it's also a story about this societal moment that they live in. So, to physically be able to see their surroundings through these lens choices was really important for us. We were also intentional about when to show sky and when to not show sky. Because we really wanted to create the feeling of these structures in the city, the backdrop of the story of the kids, could collapse at any moment—small human figures against this massive architecture.



How did you go about casting and directing your non-actors?

All of the main five kids, except for Yuta Hayashi, who plays Ata-chan, had never acted before. A lot of them had experience modeling though, so they were relaxed in front of the lens. Shina, who plays Ming, is quite a successful photographer who lives in New York. And then Arazi, who plays Tomu, was also a model for a while, but now is taking time off to continue his studies. What was amazing was that we auditioned a lot of people, but essentially every casting decision was an intuitive love at first sight. And our intuition was always correct, because it would turn out that they had so many commonalities with the actors when we asked them more about themselves. And the chemistry they ended up having went completely beyond my expectations.

Because they're nonactors, we started doing workshops over Zoom two months before shooting. They started to get to know each other, and then, a month before shooting, Shina came to Japan, and we did in-person workshops. Three days before shooting we all went to Kobe and rehearsed on location. Over the course of that, I was hoping they would develop some kind of rapport.



I was thinking about tricks and ways to make it look like they had been friends for a long time. But by the time we were shooting they were already so close and had their own inside jokes with each other. Yuta Hayashi, who plays Ata-chan, is an actor, so he really was the anchor for everybody. Most of the actors who surround the main five are very professional actors who are quite well-known in Japan.

There are parallels between the prime minister and principal character. They both accuse

their dissenters of waste. The former after a journalist tries to throw food at him. And the latter in the sit-in scene, when Fumi throws the food he offers her in the garbage. How would you articulate the connection between the two?

I was trying to avoid the school being too much of an allegory of the greater society, because I felt that could be too simplistic, so it was really important to me for the characters to actually go out of the school and into the real world.

I think the actor Shiro Sano did a really good job at not making the Principal too much of a symbol of authority or a caricature. I just found humor in how food just became such a big medium of conflict between the people and the authority in all instances.

When the Prime Minister gets a lunchbox thrown at him, that was an homage to the shoe thrown at George W. Bush. I was conscious about how food plays out in the sushi/kimbap battle in the principal's office. They're both rice rolls but one is Korean and one is Japanese and the sushi that the principal orders is this high class fancy thing. Those were symbolic choices.



I wrote a version of the sit-in that was more realistic but then I realized that it made the scene didactic and boring, because they would talk about policy and politics in really explicit terms. I really struggled about how much of that to include in the film as a whole. Because when you're in an actual room full of leftists talking about politics, you find them saying everything very explicitly. Every time I tried to be realistic about these moments, it didn't work as a film. It didn't fully land.

And that's when I thought about this kimbap and sushi moment, to imply that the students won the sit-in. I think a lot of Japanese people would find the protesters, and the journalist who throws the bento really immoral, because there's such an antagonism towards wasting

food. Both the Principle and the Prime Minister use this to their advantage, to gain the moral high ground in those instances. But for me, these moments are also comedic.

You often show the fascism of your dystopian world through the police and school administration's suppression of music. How did you approach the score as well as the tracks the kids listen to?

I've been thinking about the sound world of the film in three different layers. The first would be the objective sound of things shown in the world. Foley, dialogue, all that stuff. Then there's the layer of music that exists within the world of the film, which is kind of a subjective perspective of the characters. And then there's the top layer, the score, which to me reflects my perspective, the author of the story. It functions on a different plane, and at times it does not match the emotions of the characters. It's actually looking back at the memory of being in high school, and experiencing those things. It's almost from the perspective of Yuta and Kou as adults. Something really happy or joyful could be happening, but because the author knows how the film ends, it feels more tragic to remember those things. The music can have a sense of fatality or tragedy to it. And vice versa. There could be moments where they're fighting, but the music is actually a little bit more joyful because they're finally communicating with each other.

I've always had a lot of frustration towards films depicting club scenes. A lot of the time it just looks like the filmmaker has never been to a club before, and I love clubs. So I really wanted to make it feel real. And so the main DJ who appears in the beginning of the film is ¥ØU\$UK€ ¥UK1MAT\$U (Yousuke Yukimatsu), who is, in my mind, one of the best DJs. And he's a huge cinephile, so we approached him. He reached out to Tzusing, a Malaysian-born, Shanghai- and Taipei-based producer. He has a label called Sea Cucumber. The tracks that you hear are from the label. For other moments, the composer for the score, Lia Ouyang Rusli, also composed some techno songs. Lia is just amazing. They're a classically trained film composer, but they also have a techno/ambient side project called OHYUNG. The score incorporates electronic soundscapes, but also a classical arrangement, which I think resonates with the idea of futurity and nostalgia that's present in the film.

And then there is this one folk song sung by the activists called "Kurokurae-bushi (Eat Shit Song)". The singer is Nobuyasu Okabayashi, who's a fairly well-known, antiwar folksinger. This specific song was banned in Japan at the time of its release in the late 60s for its political content. The film actually came to life when we were protesting in front of the Ministry of Defense in Japan for considering importing Israeli drones. One of our friends from the protest was about to go away for a while, so we were all doing a goodbye gathering in a nearby park. Then one of the student activists started playing this very folk song and singing it. This was just weeks ago. And I was like "Oh, my God! The film is coming to life." The film has come true in so many odd ways, which is both validating, and disconcerting.

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Neo Sora, Director

Raised in New York and Tokyo, Neo Sora is a filmmaker, artist, and translator living between the two cities. He directed the feature-length concert film RYUICHI SAKAMOTO | OPUS (2023) which premiered at Venice. He is the director/writer of the short films THE CHICKEN (Locarno 2020) and SUGAR GLASS BOTTLE (Indie Memphis 2022, winner, Best Narrative Short), and was named one of Filmmaker Magazine's 25 New Faces of Independent Film in 2021. HAPPYEND is his debut fiction feature as a writer/director.

Albert Tholen, Producer

Albert Tholen is a producer and editor based in New York City. He produced and edited HAPPYEND (dir. Neo Sora, Venice International Film Festival 2024), produced concert film RYUICHI SAKAMOTO | OPUS (dir. Neo Sora, Venice International Film Festival 2023, Janus Films), and co-produced BRUISER (dir. Miles Warren, TIFF 2022, Hulu's Onyx Collective). In addition, Albert has produced a number of short fiction films that have premiered at major international festivals, including BRUISER (dir. Miles Warren, Sundance 2021, SXSW 2021), THE CHICKEN (dir. Neo Sora, Locarno 2020, NYFF 2020), and THE RAT (dir. Carlen May-Mann, Sundance 2019). Albert edited the BRUISER short, THE CHICKEN, and Neo Sora's short film SUGAR GLASS BOTTLE (IndieMemphis Film Festival 2022, Best Narrative Short). Currently, Albert is in development on Miles Warren's next feature, THE DEVIL WOMAN. Albert is a 2023 IFFR Rotterdam Lab Fellow, a 2022 Sundance Institute Producing Summit Fellow, and a 2017 IFP Marcie Bloom Fellow in Film.

Aiko Masubuchi, Producer

Aiko Masubuchi is a producer, film programmer and translator based in Tokyo and New York. She produced HAPPYEND (dir. Neo Sora, Venice International Film Festival 2024), RYUICHI SAKAMOTO | OPUS (dir. Neo Sora, Venice International Film Festival 2023), and ONE HUNDRED YEARS AND HOPE (dir. Takashi Nishihara, International Film Festival Rotterdam 2023). Short films she has produced include THE CHICKEN (dir. Neo Sora, Locarno Film Festival 2020), WHAT IS IT THAT YOU SAID? (dir. Shun Ikezoe, New York Film Festival 2020) and SUGAR GLASS BOTTLE (dir. Neo Sora, winner of Best Narrative Short at IndieMemphis 2022). Aiko has participated in IFFR Sessions, Rotterdam Lab, EAVE/Ties That Bind and was a Sundance Producers Summit Fellow.

Eric Nyari, Producer

Based in Tokyo and New York, Eric is President of Cineric Creative and produces narrative features, documentaries, and 4K digital restorations of classic films. He has produced numerous films in Japan, including director Amir Naderi's CUT, which was the Opening Film of the 2011 Venice Film Festival's Orizzonti section, and the critically acclaimed portrait documentary RYUICHI SAKAMOTO: CODA (Venice 2017). In recent years, he has produced Takeshi Fukunaga's AINU MOSIR, which was awarded a Special Jury Mention in Tribeca's International Narrative Competition in 2020; Yoichiro Okutani's ODORIKO, which won two awards at Cinema du Reel in 2021; Neo Sora's RYUICHI SAKAMOTO | OPUS, which premiered at the 2023 Venice and New York Film Festival as well as Sora's forthcoming narrative debut, HAPPYEND, premiering at Venice 2024; Shiori Ito's self-documentary BLACK BOX DIARIES, which premiered to critical praise at Sundance 2024.

Alex Lo, Producer

Alex C. Lo is a producer and the founder of Cinema Inutile, a New York and Tokyo-based development, production and finance company that focuses on artist-driven films from

underrepresented perspectives and international co-productions between Asia, Europe, Latin America and the US.

Alex most recently produced SOME RAIN MUST FALL by Qiu Yang (2024 Berlinale, Encounters Special Jury Prize), BEING MARIA by Jessica Palud (2024 Cannes, Official Selection), AN UNFINISHED FILM by Lou Ye (2024 Cannes, Official Selection), VIÊT AND NAM (2024 Cannes, Un Certain Regard) by Troung Minh Quy, GIRLS WILL BE GIRLS by Shuchi Talati (2024 Sundance, Audience Award), and THE SETTLERS (2023 Cannes, Un Certain Regard) which was selected as Chile's entry to the Academy Awards. Upcoming titles include STRANGER EYES (2024 Venice, Competition) by Siew Hua Yeo and HAPPYEND (2024 Venice, Orizzonti) by Neo Sora.

Alex received their MA in Cinema Studies from NYU Tisch School of the Arts. They are an alumnus of the Golden Horse Film Academy and the EAVE Producers Workshop.

Anthony Chen, Producer

Anthony Chen is an award-winning writer, director and producer from Singapore. Chen became the first Singaporean to be awarded at Cannes with short film AH MA in 2007. His debut feature ILO ILO (2013) was awarded the Caméra d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, followed by 40 awards internationally including 4 Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan. His sophomore film WET SEASON (2019) was nominated for the Platform Prize at the Toronto International Film Festival. Both films are Singapore's official submissions for the Academy Awards. DRIFT, starring Oscar Best Actress nominee Cynthia Erivo, marked his Englishlanguage debut and premiered at Sundance in 2023. THE BREAKING ICE is his first Chineselanguage film made in China and premiered in Un Certain Regard at Cannes the same year. The film was once again the official Singapore submission to the Oscars, As producer, he produces out of his Giraffe Pictures outfit based in Singapore. Apart from his own films, produced films include Singapore filmmaker Kirsten Tan's debut POP AYE (2017) which won at Sundance, He Shuming's feature debut AJOOMMA (2022) which premiered in competition at Busan and Thai director Sorayos Prapapan's debut feature ARNOLD IS A MODEL STUDENT (2022), which competed at Locarno. Upcoming produced films include Neo Sora's Venice-selected HAPPYEND and Indonesian filmmaker Tumpal Tampubolon's debut feature CROCODILE TEARS which will premiere at TIFF.

Norifumi Ataka, Production Designer

Production designer born in Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan in 1971. The first film he production-designed was Moonlight Whispers (dir. Akihiko Shiota, 1999). He has since worked on many Japanese films including numerous films by Kiyoshi Kurosawa such as Wife of a Spy (Venice Film Festival 2020). Recent titles he has worked on include My Sunshine (dir. Hiroshi Okuyama, Cannes Film Festival 2024) and Cloud (dir. Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Venice Film Festival 2024).

Bill Kirsten, Director of Photography

Bill Kirstein is a cinematographer based in New York. He has over a decade of experience shooting fiction, documentary and commercial films and has worked with big artists such as Beyonce, Paul McCartney, Tina Fey, Jon Hamm, Justin Timberlake, Renee Rapp, Maya Hawke and Zoe Saldana. Fragments of Paradise, which he was the DoP for won Best Documentary at Venice Film Festival in 2022. So Pretty (dir. Jessie Rovinelli), which Kirstein lensed and

produced was first screened at Berlin Film Festival and won Best International Feature at FIC Valdiva. Kirstein also shot Sora's "The Chicken" on 16mm, Mean Girls (2024) for Paramount Pictures and was the DoP for Ryuichi Sakamoto | Opus.

Lia Ouyang Rusli, Composer

Lia Ouyang Rusli (they/them) is a film composer & artist based in Brooklyn, NY. They recently scored A24's Problemista, HBO's Fantasmas series, and the Gotham Award and Independent Spirit nominated films Test Pattern (Kino Lorber) and Bruiser (Hulu). They also scored short films Bambirak and Rest Stop which won Jury Awards for International Fiction and US Fiction at Sundance. They are the recipient of the Van Lier Fellowship for Music Composition, ASCAP Jimmy Van Heusen Award, Pioneer Works Music Residency, and BAFTA USA Breakthrough Fellowship. Under their solo moniker OHYUNG, they produce genre-shifting music that moves between ambient, experimental pop, and distorted noise. Their most recent record imagine naked! is a collection of ambient soundscapes out now on NNA tapes and was described by The Quietus as a "masterful selection of muscular, shuddering, trembling ambient excursions" and was hailed by NPR as one of the best 50 albums of 2022.

KEY CAST

Yuta ユウタ Hayato Kurihara 栗原 颯人 Kou コウ Yukito Hidaka 日高 由起刀

Ata-chan アタちゃん Yuta Hayashi 林 裕太 Ming ミン Shina Peng シナ・ペン

Tomu トム ARAZI アラージ Fumi フミ Kilala Inori 祷 キララ

Fukuko 福子 PUSHIM

Okada 岡田 Ayumu Nakajima 中島 歩

Yoko Irie 入江陽子 Makiko Watanabe 渡辺 真起子

with

Principal 長井校長 Shiro Sano 佐野 史郎

KEY CREW

Writer-Director Neo Sora

Producers Albert Tholen

Aiko Masubuchi

Eric Nyari Alex C. Lo Anthony Chen

Executive Producers Kaoru Hayashi

Douglas Choi Robina Riccitiello Ema Ryan Yamazaki

Co-Executive Producers Samuel Sagan

Su Ching Teh Teoh Yi Peng Engin Yenidunya

Director of Photography Bill Kirstein

Production Designer Norifumi Ataka

Editor Albert Tholen

Original Score Lia Ouyang Rusli

Casting Director Rikiya Takano

First Assistant Director Keita Kumano

Lighting Designer Yasuhiro Kaneko

Costume Designer Juni Kurita

Hair & Makeup Junko Hirabayashi

Sound Recordist Osamu Takizawa

Sound Supervisor Miki Nomura

Sound Designer Tatsuya Ohbo

PRODUCTION COMPANIES

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TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Shooting Format Digital / Color Exhibition Format DCP / Color

Resolution 4K Flat 3996x2160

Aspect Ratio 1.85:1
Audio Format 5.1ch
Duration 1h 53m
Language Japanese