

"Joyous, delightfully imaginative, serene and beautiful,  
and ultimately enchanting"

- Seattle Post-Intelligencer

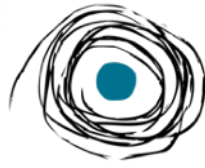


a film by  
Katsuhito  
Ishii

the  
taste  
of  
tea

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COSTUME DESIGNER: YUKIO KAWANO  
EDITING: YUKIO KAWANO  
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PRODUCED BY: YUKIO KAWANO  
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FILM MOVEMENT<sup>®</sup>  
CLASSICS

*presents*

the  
taste  
of  
tea

a film by  
Katsuhito Ishii

**PRESENTED IN A NEW HD MASTER  
SUPERVISED BY DIRECTOR KATSUHITO ISHII**

**“Brilliant... to say that it’s just a goofy bit of fun is to damn Ishii’s masterpiece with faint praise... its avoidance of easy categorization only makes it more of a must-see.”**

–David Fear, *Time Out New York*

Japan | 2004 | Japanese with English Subtitles  
Comedy, Fantasy | 143 minutes | 1.66:1

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## SYNOPSIS

The pristine image of the Japanese family is turned on its uber-polite head with surreal aplomb in this far out collection of hilarious vignettes. Set in the languid countryside, mom is an eccentric artist who eschews household chores for an animation project with occasional help from crazy grandpa. Meanwhile dad is just your everyday hypnotherapist. Their teenaged son suffers from hangups about the opposite sex while his little sister must contend with a doppelgänger. Uncle is a groovy music producer on a respite whose ghostly past experiences still haunt him.

Maverick director Katsuhito Ishii (who created the animated sequence in *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*) pulled out all the stops for this endearing outré take on the Japanese psyche. Replete with non-stop irreverent gags, anime digressions, musical numbers and candy-coated lysergic passages, *THE TASTE OF TEA* is, “a true delight that elevates feel-good cinema to a whole new level and charms from start to finish” (*Screen Anarchy*).



## KATSUHITO ISHII BIOGRAPHY

Born December 31, 1966 in Niigata Prefecture, Katsuhito Ishii graduated from Musashino Art University in 1992 and then began his career as a commercial director at Tohokushinsha Film Corporation. He debuted as a film director in 1995 with the short *The Promise of August* and continued with renowned features such as *Shark Skin Man and Peach Hip Girl* (1999), *Party 7* (2000), *The Taste of Tea* (2004), *My Darling of the Mountains* (2008), and *Smuggler* (2011). Between the years 2001 and 2002, he created a series of shorts including the 3D animation series *Hal & Bons* and the 2D animated space opera *Trava*. In 2003, he took on the animation production for Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*. His latest film *Hello! Junichi* (2014) was made in collaboration with children and past attendees from workshops he has held.



## PRODUCTION NOTES THE MAKING OF GOOD TEA

### ORGANICALLY GROWN

THE TASTE OF TEA first came to filmmaker Katsuhito Ishii in bits and pieces. Says Ishii, “After I finished shooting PARTY 7, I had vague ideas about a story centered on a family in the *Sazae-San/Chibi-Maruko-chan* (Japanese animation series) vein, but with a twist. So I began jotting them down in my notebook. At that point, I already knew it would feature a little girl so I came up with the idea that she’d see certain things, how the grandfather would only talk gibberish, etc... and then I sort of connected the dots to form a more linear narrative.” As with all his previous films, Ishii then storyboarded the whole film instead of writing a script. “I finished the first draft in October 2002. It then went through a few revisions in text form, but ultimately reverted to the initial storyboards.”

“From time to time, Ishii would show me a page or two, but I never did grasp the project in its entirety until he handed me the completed storyboards.” reflects Ishii’s long-time producing partner Kazuto Takida. “It was a slight departure from his previous two films; a more personal film that embraced some of my favorite themes like family.” Ishii explains his intentions: “I’d always wanted to do a family drama, in a less-aggressive, less-‘entertainment’ style than my other films. But the stylistic difference is not something that reflects any changes in me as a person.” Agrees executive producer Hilo Iizumi, “The imagery was pure Ishii, but more accessible perhaps, owing to the themes’ obvious universality.” Takida and Iizumi immediately began developing the project under Grasshoppa! Films, a production outfit they founded in 2001.

### CASTING THE HARUNOS

#### *Sachiko – the baby sister*

The biggest challenge during the four month casting process was finding the actors to play the two main characters, Sachiko and Hajime, the younger members of the Haruno family. Ishii was very specific in his search: “The last thing I wanted was for them to be perky and exuberant, but we kept getting

these overly spirited child actors at the auditions. It was a nightmare.” This was especially the case of Sachiko, the six-year-old protagonist of *THE TASTE OF TEA*. With only a month before filming began, Ishii still hadn’t found his lead. “That’s when Maya (Banno) walked in. I asked her to play (the character) rather gloomily as if she was a ‘grown-up’ and the result was beautiful, exactly what I was looking for.”

### *Hajime – the older brother*

The impressionable older brother of Sachiko was another tough role to cast. After months of auditions, Ishii finally made the unexpected choice to cast Takahiro Sato, whose appearance and demeanor had nothing in common with the naïve Hajime. Even producer Takida, whose collaboration with Ishii spans for almost a decade, admits he had trouble understanding Ishii’s decision at first. “I mean, Sato was such a typical urban teenager and we were supposed to be looking for this unsophisticated adolescent country boy. But I trusted Ishii’s instincts.” Only to be proven right on the very first day of the shoot. With the help of an on-set haircut and a set of high school uniforms, Takida saw Sato transform into Hajime before his eyes. “I have to give it to Ishii. It was a pretty amazing moment. I don’t think even Sato saw the potential in himself. I think in a way, Sato’s a bit like Ishii’s Antoine Doinel,” Takida muses, “They do look alike too.”

### *Ayano – the uncle*

Having collaborated with Ishii on all of his feature films and numerous other projects, casting Tadanobu Asano came naturally. “He just has this incredible presence.” says Ishii of the actor’s appeal. “He emanates a certain ‘solidness’ regardless of which side of the camera he’s on.” Takida adds warmly, “Asano’s definitely part of the team. There’s a sense that we’ve grown together through past projects. I also personally think that Asano and Ishii’s sensibilities are nearly identical.” As for Asano, he explains his motive for playing Ayano a little differently. “Well, my part had a scene with Hotaru (a character in the acclaimed TV series *Kita no Kuni kara (The Land of the North)*, played by Tomoko Nakajima). How could I resist?” He’s like a drama teacher to me” Ishii adds, “Sometimes I think he feels most liberated when he’s in front of a camera.”

### *Nobuo – the father*

“I’d always respected Tomokazu Miura's work, so this was like a dream come true. There's one scene in (director Shinji) Soomai's *Wait and See (Ah Haru)* where his performance kind of obliterates any trace of directorial intentions. It blew me away. I kept going over that scene. The admiration was mutual according to the veteran actor. “I’d been following Ishii's career for some time, secretly hoping for an opportunity to work together. But the funny thing was, when I was finally approached, it was for a script that seemed too removed from what I knew about his style.” Confused, Miura says he re-read the script over and over. “Actually, it wasn't until I saw the final film that I fully realized how unmistakably Ishii the film was.” However, this did little to make Miura turn down this role, or keep him from inviting Ishii to his country house before filming began. “I was terribly nervous.” reflects Ishii. “We made some pottery and he taught me how to use the wheel. Although we didn’t discuss the project or the character, I think it helped us a great deal in building up a quiet rapport.”

### *Yoshiko – the mother*

The actress chosen to play the challenging role of a mother rediscovering her career as a skilled animator is Satomi Tezuka, mainly known for her work in television. “I wanted someone sweet and light for that role and she was perfect.” says Ishii. “As an actor, she's the type that does extensive research. In this case, she prepared by watching the behind-the-scenes of *Spirited Away*, studying Ghibli’s production designs and receiving first-hand advice from (Takeshi) Koike (of Madhouse who directed the animation sequence in THE TASTE OF TEA). “It was a new experience for me, doing scenes with a real-life animation director” comments Tezuka, speaking of her mostly improvised sequences with filmmaker Hideaki Anno (*Neon Evangelion*) who makes a cameo appearance in the film. “Anno is such an unpredictable ad-libber, you never know what he’ll do next. That too, was a remarkably refreshing experience.”

### *Akira (Grandpa) – the grandfather*

Despite writing the role with the idiosyncratic Tatsuya Gasyuin in mind, Ishii says he initially considered the possibility of casting someone closer to the

character's age. "But the role required an edge and precision in terms of movements and dialogue and given how I wanted Grandpa to be ridiculously self-centric as well as eccentric, going with Gasyuin seemed like the best choice." This called for the 52-year-old actor to go through three hours of special 'aging' make-up every day. "The effect I was aiming for was cartoonish rather than realistic." says Ishii. But for some members of the cast, the results were far more convincing than he had intended. "One day, I was having lunch before I went into make-up and Maya comes up to me and asks with that sweet and innocent voice of hers: 'Why are you wearing make-up today?'" recalls Gasyuin with a chuckle, "Apparently, that was the first time she saw me without any make up on." "The extra three hours put a lot of strain on him and the crew, but it was worth it. Grandpa embodies my ideal future. I'd love to live my life like him," smiles Ishii.

### MOTEGI - PICTURE PERFECT

While casting the film, the filmmakers found themselves having to confront another arduous search. "It was probably the toughest part of the whole filmmaking process." admits Ishii of their struggles finding the perfect location. "I'd thought of shooting it in Okutama where I'd been to canoe, but there was no room to maneuver the camera, so I had the location manager comb the Kanto region for about three months." When that proved unsuccessful, Ishii gave his line producer a drawing he'd done of the fictional town which included every detail from the Haruno residence to the river running by it. After another two months, the line producer returned with photos of Motegi (Tochigi prefecture). "And it was like a miracle. I mean, it was exactly like the drawing I made. I knew nothing could go wrong as long as I shot the film there."

Having found the perfect location, the film was now ready to embark on its 45 day shoot. Principal photography began on April 17th, 2003 with the filming of the cherry blossoms, the iconic and nostalgic symbol of springtime often associated with the sense of a new beginning (as April marks the start of a new academic or fiscal year) in the Japanese culture. However, as beautiful as they are, shooting cherry blossoms is a tricky business for any film due to the unpredictability and limited window of time the flowers are in bloom. Weather forecasts were closely studied and monitored to capture the perfect timing. "However, there were no blossoms left on any of the trees in Tokyo by the time we left for the shoot," recalls producer Kazuto Takida. "So we were

understandably nervous. But when we reached the location, we were greeted with a glorious cherry storm; they were in full bloom, all along the river, pink petals falling like snowflakes.” And amidst of this burst of pink, THE TASTE OF TEA began its first day of shooting.

### VISUALIZING TEA

As with his previous films, Ishii and his crew referred to the storyboards instead of the shooting script during principal photography. Although Ishii frequently allowed the actors to improvise on set, the film remained remarkably close to its original form.

The shooting itself, however, was done in a completely different style. The majority of the scenes were long single takes with a fixed camera, often wide shots with very little coverage. The visual scheme, Ishii says, had very much to do with why he wanted to make THE TASTE OF TEA. “My primal motive was to shoot a film I wanted to see as a spectator, not to make a film I wanted to create as a filmmaker, as I’ve done in the past. I wanted the film to be something that I could enjoy watching over and over again, and because of this, I made a conscious decision to keep the visual tone as even as possible, so as to not have any particular details stand out, feel forced or emphasized. I was after a subdued look, and that went for the performances as well.” The challenge that came with it, adds Ishii, was finding a way to convey warmth despite the often static and somewhat detached nature of the cinematography style. “It’s easier to create a cooler, drier look with that kind of approach. To keep it restrained but warm, without the scene feeling controlled is a much harder task.”

### THE LITTLE ACTRESS AND HER BACKFLIP

Maya Banno, as the six-year-old heroine Sachiko, won over her fellow cast mates and crew with her deftly nuanced performance delivered through instant flickers of expressions and limited dialogue, often given in subdued, muttered tones. “She’s a genius.” praises director Ishii. “There are not that many six-year-olds who can improvise on set, and she certainly can. She also understands directions and tends to immerse herself in the role.” But only when she’s in front the camera. Being the same age as her screen persona at the time of filming, the spirited young actress was frequently seen playing

with the crew between takes. Asked what she enjoyed most during the shoot, Maya happily admits, “Playing with everybody!” Ishii says that this resulted in an unexpected contribution to the film. “She’d become quite tired by the time we had the shots set up, and that gave the character just the right tonality.” For Maya, the greatest challenge in her first major feature film was the backflip Sachiko manages successfully during the film’s climax. Since she was too young to have the parallel bar as part of her PE curriculum at school, Maya began training with her mother in order to master the technique for the scene. Her tireless effort continued through the filming, until finally, the day had come to shoot it. “But when I said ‘Action!’, she just froze.” says Ishii, who was even more surprised when he heard her begin to sob. “We had made sure the bar was the same height as the one she was using for practice and that the ground was nice and solid for a steady kick, so we first assumed it was the added pressure of us trying to shoot the scene during magic hour.” explains producer Kazuto Takida. “But then we found out that the bar was 3mm wider in diameter than the one she’d been working with.” The slight difference may not have been detectable by an adult, but the problem was critical for the tiny hands of a six-year-old. A week later, the cast and crew returned to shoot the scene again – this time with a bar 3mm thinner. “She made it during the first take.” smiles Ishii, recalling Maya’s proud expression in the last scene. “What impressed me was that she never complained about the bar, never made any excuses. I thought to myself: “Wow, she may be young, but she’s in a much higher league as a person than me!”

### ACTING WITH HOTARU

With well over 40 films to date, Tadanobu Asano is undoubtedly the most sought after film actor of his generation. “One of the highlights for me this time around was definitely the scene with Tomoko Nakajima.” says the prolific actor/musician of his third feature collaboration with director Katsuhito Ishii. “She plays my ex-girlfriend in the film. Like everyone else, I’d been watching (the hit TV drama) *Kita No Kuni Kara (The Land of the North)* over the years since I was a kid so I was naturally excited to be able to work with (Nakajima’s character in *Kita~*) Hotaru.”

Ishii explains his intentions behind the scene and casting of the acclaimed actress. “That scene (with Asano and Nakajima) was something I wanted to watch on screen as a spectator. The role of Akira was more of a sluttish tomboy in the first draft, but changed into a rather conventional character

during the course of the writing process. And that was why I thought of Tomoko Nakajima. Because I knew she'd be able to take this relatively ordinary role and turn it into something extraordinary." The sequence was done in one take with one camera. "The awkwardness, the hints of tension, their dialogue that doesn't quite connect... It was wonderful to shoot. We did three takes, but I used the first one because it just grabbed me, on set and on film." Asano agrees, "It was a scene I was determined to get right. And on the day of the shoot, it just happened on the first take. I love that scene even from an audience's point of view."

## STARTING FROM SCRATCH

While Asano and Nakajima were playing an ex-couple reconnecting as friends, Takahiro Sato and Anna Tsuchiya were playing schoolmates on their way to high school romance. In a charming sequence, Hajime (Sato) manages not only to fulfill his fantasy of playing a game of Go with his dream girl, but to summon enough courage to tell her about it. "That sequence was shot early on", says Ishii. "It was a long scene and I wanted it to feel realistic, so what I did was give Sato the evil eye, as if I was ready to kill him if he screwed up", he grins. "It was a way to establish the tension I required."

Although THE TASTE OF TEA was not his first movie, it was Sato's first major role and the project soon became a huge learning experience for the young actor. This included learning how to run properly. Comments Ishii, "The Hajime character had quite a few scenes where he's running or riding his bike, but in real-life, Sato just couldn't run at all, even when he thought he was doing top speed. So we had to teach him from scratch." As it turns out, Sato had to learn other skills. A recent high school graduate, Sato came to spend one month on location by himself, Packing a cheeky attitude and little professionalism. Despite endeavors by Ishii and the crew, this didn't change until Sato discovered how expensive 35mm film stock was. Once he realized the responsibility he had to the film, he began to show up on his days off to watch the veteran actors work and to help the crew with their equipment after wrapping for the day. He would diligently listen to the Ishii's directions, prepare for the scene scheduled for the following day and rehearse with the assistant directors.

By the time they were ready to shoot the scene where the ecstatic Hajime fights an imaginary foe in his room, Sato felt confident enough to make a

suggestion to the director about his lines. The take made everyone on set roar with laughter and Sato had, for the very first time, truly become a member of the team.

### PLAYING OLD

Going through three to four hours of special make-up everyday was an integral part of actor Tatsuya Gasyuin's performance as the eccentric legendary animator, Grandpa. But in order to add substance to the physical transformation, the then-51-year-old Gasyuin decided to do additional research. "Before we started filming, I went to parks and observed behaviors of men roughly between 66 to 71." he says with a mock sigh, "Only to discover all my efforts were useless on set; Ishii wasn't looking for someone conventional. He wanted someone like Yamada (the bizarre assassin he played in Ishii's feature debut *Shark Skin Man and Peach Hip Girl*), only 30 years older!"

### ANIMATION IN TEA

Being a seasoned fan of animation, Katsuhito Ishii has been involved in creating traditional 2D and 3D CG animations and often lets his love for the genre cross over into his live-action films. For any production the filmmaker is working on, he draws and designs the look of all the elements, from character to sets in minute details. This was again the case with *THE TASTE OF TEA*, in which he had a two minute animated sequence. Intentionally done in the good old Japanimation style, the conceptual designs were then given to animator/director Takeshi Koike of the animation power house Madhouse. Having worked with Ishii on the opening sequence of the feature film *Party 7* and the short series *Trava*, Koike is another trusted collaborator of Ishii's and one of the handful of directors chosen by the Wachowski Brothers to create a segment for the ambitious *Animatrix* compilation. Koike also gave advice to Satomi Tezuka who was playing a professional animator in the film.

Featured mostly with Tezuka's character Yoshiko, the real-life animation/live-action director Hideaki Anno makes an entertaining cameo appearance in the film – as an animation director. Known for the philosophical TV series, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, Anno, like Ishii, works both in live-action and animation and has so far helmed two live-action features, *Love & Pop* (1998) and *Ritual*

(2000). In his third, *Cutie Honey* (2004) Ishii returns the favor by way of a cameo.

## DUB, BATHROOM TUNES & CONTEMPORARY DANCE

The soundtrack for the film was created by Japanese dub/reggae fusionists Little Tempo. As originators of the Nu school in the genre, the eclectic band has released over ten albums (including dub albums) since making their debut in 1995. The memorable theme song written for THE TASTE OF TEA is their first venture into film and features vocals by singer/actress/model Yoko Fujita amongst a variety of instruments, notably the steel pan.

Most of the tunes sung by Grandpa played by Tatsuya Gasyuin were composed by the multifaceted director himself. “I had Eiko Sakurai arrange them for me, but the lyrics are basically taken from stuff I’d blurt out in the bathroom when I’m drunk. So there was a strange sense of nostalgia watching Grandpa singing them on set.” Ishii muses.

According to Ishii, he also had a hand in the choreography for “Oh, My Mountain,” the loopy, broken-record song ‘composed’ by one of the characters in the film. “I’d say to the choreographer, ‘I don’t want them just visiting the mountain; I want them to BE the mountain.’ And she went ‘I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.’”

Internationally acclaimed dancer Kaiji Moriyama makes his film debut with his portrayal of the mysterious performer befriended by Ayano (Tadanobu Asano). Wildly impressed with his originality after watching a video of his London performance, Ishii approached the talented Moriyama to join the colorful cast.

## POST-PRODUCTION

Despite shooting more footage than any of his previous films, the editing process was a smooth one according to Ishii. “We had very few takes for each scene and the narrative structure stayed pretty much intact, so editing mainly consisted of trimming the scenes.”

One of the techniques Ishii experimented with the film was desensitizing it during the development process to decrease the contrast. “We’d done the opposite with *Sharkskin Man* and *Party 7* to achieve an intensely high contrast, but for THE TASTE OF TEA, I wanted it to have an almost flat look, like a traditional Japanese-style painting. This, again, was because I wanted nothing to stand out visually.” Evidently, it was also imperative that the CG and live action elements were integrated seamlessly.

## THE TASTE OF TEA AND BEYOND

THE TASTE OF TEA was completed in late 2003 after five months of post-production. “Something you think you understand, but in fact don’t?” When asked what the title indicates, Ishii modestly tries to explain without getting too analytical. “I mean, people drink a variety of tea every day. Perhaps more than they realize. (You may think there’s not much to it,) but it’s necessary. Looking back on my childhood, I was always drinking tea, whenever it was, wherever I was, and that is something that’s obviously reflected in the Harunos. In the film, every member of the family is struggling with their own little problems, which are, in a way, like the spring haze. Their issues are not life-threatening and kind of fuzzy, transient, the kind that time eventually resolves. When I remembered how I used to drink tea all the time without even registering what it tasted like, I somehow thought it fitting as the title.”

Long-time partner Takida adds: “In a way, the film is about moments and eternity, an exploration of the essence of time within our lives, and how those moments in between when we’re not particularly being active or alert are what make life interesting. You could say that tea is a metaphor for those moments.”

And what exactly is filmmaking to Ishii? “In comparison to directing commercials which for me seems like a much more specialized craft, I suppose making films is a substitute for the hobby that I don’t have. Instead of spending my time on other things, I make up stories and draw storyboards. I would say it’s a daring adventure for grown-ups.”

## CAST

Sachiko Haruno  
Hajime Haruno  
Ayano Haruno  
Yoshiko Haruno  
Nobuo Haruno  
Akira Todoroki  
Ikki Todoroki  
Akira Terako  
Aoi Suzuishi  
Narrator

**Maya Banno**  
**Takahiro Sato**  
**Tadanobu Asano**  
**Satomi Tezuka**  
**Tomokazu Miura**  
**Tatsuya Gasyuin**  
**Ikki Todoroki**  
**Tomoko Nakajima**  
**Anna Tsuchiya**  
**Emi Wakui**

## CREW

Written, Directed & Edited by  
Executive Producer  
Producers  
Director of Photography  
Lighting Director  
Production Designer  
Music

**Katsuhito Ishii**  
**Hilo Iizumi**  
**Kazuto Takida, Kazunori Wadakura**  
**Kosuke Matsushima**  
**Taro Kimura**  
**Yuji Tsuzuki**  
**Little Tempo**



## ABOUT FILM MOVEMENT

Founded in 2002, Film Movement is a North American distributor of award-winning independent and foreign films based in New York City. It has released more than 300 feature films culled from prestigious film festivals worldwide including the Oscar-nominated films *Theeb* (2016) and *Corpus Christi* (2020). Film Movement's theatrical releases include American independent films, documentaries, and foreign-language arthouse titles. Its catalog includes works by directors such as Ryusuke Hamaguchi, Lee Isaac Chung, Hirokazu Kore-eda, Maren Ade, Jessica Hausner, Ciro Guerra, Bertrand Bonello and Mélanie Laurent.

In 2015, Film Movement launched its reissue label Film Movement Classics, featuring new restorations released theatrically as well as on digital platforms, Blu-ray and DVD, including films by such noted directors as Ang Lee, Chen Kaige, Luchino Visconti, Stanley Kwan, Peter Greenaway, Bille August, Marleen Gorris, Takeshi Kitano, Arturo Ripstein, King Hu, Lee Chang Dong, Hideo Gosha and Sergio Corbucci.

For more information, please visit [www.filmmovement.com](http://www.filmmovement.com)

