

## Japanese Films in Venice

By Masakazu HOSODA

If you are a Japanese film buff, you likely have already been to see the three latest works by Japanese directors that were entered in the main competition of the 65th Venice International Film Festival held from late August to early September: *Achilles and the Tortoise* by Takeshi Kitano, *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* by Hayao Miyazaki, and *The Sky Crawlers* by Mamoru Oshii. Even if you are unfamiliar with Japanese films, you may have heard of the names of the three directors, who deserve the pride of our country.

Works by Kitano, also known as a gifted comedian by the name of Beat Takeshi, have won acclaim at Venice, Berlin, Cannes and other international film festivals. Kitano uses his real name when he sits in the director's chair.

Miyazaki is a prominent director of animated feature films who explores untrodden fields of the animation world. He achieved a double feat of winning top prizes at two major international film festivals in the same year, the Golden Bear at the 2002 Berlin Film Festival and the 2002 Academy Award for Best Animated Feature, with his *Spirited Away*. The film, released in 2001, broke box office records in Japan.

Oshii, a charismatic figure admired by *anime* fans and *otaku* (geeks) all over the world, is known as the director of *Stand Alone Complex*, an animation film that helped establish the coined word *Japanimation*.

As already reported by news media, this year's Golden Lion for Best Film of the Venice film festival went to *The Wrestler*, directed by Darren Aronofsky and starring Mickey Rourke. But a Kyodo News reporter who covered the film festival for about 10 days reported that the works by the three Japanese directors were extremely popular among local people.

*Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* particularly enthused Italian movie fans who gathered on Lido Island, the venue of the festival. The film is a fable based on a mermaid legend and adapted to contemporary Japan. Judging by the initial reaction, the charm of its heroine, *Ponyo*, a female fish, looked set win the hearts of moviegoers the world over.

According to the Kyodo reporter, the official screening of *Ponyo* was greeted with enthusiastic applause with many members of the audience humming the theme song. Local newspapers reported that everyone fell in love with the little fish and that *Ponyo* gave the film festival dreams and hopes. One report said the film was so popular that one journalist even predicted that



Japanese director Takeshi Kitano (left) and Japanese actress Kanako Higuchi get a standing ovation from the audience after their movie "Achilles and the Tortoise" was shown on Aug. 28 during the 65th Venice International Film Festival.

the animated *Ponyo* herself would likely win the best actress award. German filmmaker Wim Wenders, chairman of the jury, set the audience laughing when he said all jury members could sing the movie's theme song.

Enthusiastic support was also extended to Kitano's *Achilles and the Tortoise*, which depicts the naivety and madness of a struggling painter immersed in his own world. Kitano, a familiar figure in Venice, was greeted by local fans who wore identical T-shirts in a show of support. Journalists from 85 media organizations in 25 countries other than Japan covered Kitano. Upon returning home, he said with a wry smile that his films are more popular abroad than in Japan.

Meanwhile, assessment of Oshii's *The Sky Crawlers* was divided. Having seen the film in Japan, I personally feel that although his technical expertise on display in the realistic battle scenes is worthy of praise, the inwardness of the world he depicts and the cynicism that underlies his film left me less than satisfied.

Apart from the three entries, a Japanese-Chinese coproduction film starring popular Japanese actor Joe Odagiri and a French film based on a detective novel by Japanese writer Ranpo Edogawa were among other entries at this year's Venice festival, making Japan's presence felt strongly in Venice. It is safe to say that the Japanese film world is no longer represented only by such great masters as Akira Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasujiro Ozu.

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Masakazu Hosoda is chief editor, the Cultural News Section, Kyodo News.