

Jerusalem Prize & “Departures”

By Masakazu HOSODA

It is often said that Japan is underpowered in disseminating its culture toward the rest of the world. I myself feel that Japan is not so powerful in terms of globally transmitting its genuine culture and art, except classic performing arts like *Noh* and *Kabuki* as well as popular culture such as *anime* and *karaoke*.

So, two news items reported in February in a short interval of time are very noteworthy as a cultural phenomenon diffused from Japan toward the world: the awarding of the Jerusalem Prize to Japanese writer Haruki Murakami on February 15 and the awarding of the Oscar for best foreign-language film to “*Okuribito*” (“*Departures*”), directed by Yojiro Takita, on February 23.

Murakami is a contemporary Japanese novelist extraordinarily popular overseas. Fluent in English, Murakami gives lectures and attends meetings abroad, mostly in the United States, more often than in Japan. He made his name in Europe after winning the Kafka Prize and has been frequently mentioned as a possible winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature for the past several years.

Accordingly, his having won a literary prize in Israel, where Hebrew translations of his works have been published, was not surprising. But somewhat unexpected developments ensued.

As soon as the award was reported, various organizations including NGOs in Japan urged Murakami not to accept the prize if he was opposed to Israel’s attack against the Gaza Strip. After careful consideration (and despite his rooted dislike of appearing before the public), he made up his mind to go to Jerusalem. In a speech delivered before Israeli President Shimon Perez and others, Murakami likened “the system” and individuals to a wall and an egg, and declared, “Between a high, solid wall and an egg that breaks against it, I will always stand on the side of the egg.” Though expressed in an indirect way, his remark was a criticism of Israel’s attack against Gaza.

The speech drew favorable responses on one hand, with critics saying “he fought well or won a battle as a man of letters” or “he brilliantly proved himself, in a tense circumstance, to be a trustworthy artisan of words.” On the other hand, however, some critics wondered whether there would be anyone who stands on the side of a wall in such a situation. Some others ridiculed the “stylishness of his general statement.” For my part, I took Murakami’s action and speech positively because he translated the crux of his thought into action.

After the speech, Murakami quipped that he felt like



Photo: Kyodo News

Actor Masahiro Motoki (left) and director Yojiro Takita attend a news conference in Tokyo on Feb. 28 upon returning from the 81st Annual Academy Awards where their film “*Okuribito*” (*Departures*) won the Oscar for the best foreign-language movie. Motoki played the lead role in the film.

Gary Cooper in “*High Noon*” when he left for Jerusalem, adding “at least no shoes were thrown at me during the speech.”

Meanwhile, the second news item was more surprising to me. “*Departures*” depicts the dignity of life and death through the eyes of a young man in a provincial city who makes living by playing the role of an expert in placing dead bodies into coffins. It is indeed a Japanese-style film. No Japanese film had received the best foreign-language Oscar since 1955, and so Japanese people pinned high hopes on “*Departures*” as a possible winner of the coveted award. However, I personally felt the movie to be lightweight in substance compared with films entered by other countries such as Israel, Germany and France. I was also skeptical of its script, the plot of which was too obvious. Even the director of the film as well as performers hardly hid their feeling that they were happy just to be able to attend the ceremony.

I was watching the live telecast of the Oscars with my colleagues in my workplace and when presenter Liam Neeson announced “*Departures*, Japan,” we raised our voice in surprise.

Is it too ironic to say that members of the voting committee, who got weary of watching other nominated films, most of which dealt with serious themes like war, politics and immigration, enjoyed a brief moment of relief when they viewed a film from a distant, different country which induced mild laughter?

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