

# NIKKEI VOICE

A National Forum for Japanese Canadians

October 2011

## All Kinds of Emotion Seen in Japanese Films at TIFF 2011

By EVAN A. MACKAY

TORONTO—There were eight feature films from Japan screened at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) 2011 last month. Many movie-goers wondered what to expect from Japan's film industry in the wake of the Tohoku earthquake this past March. While no film was "about" that catastrophe, filmmaker and poet Sion Sono adapted his new film *Himizu* ("mole")—in production at the time—to be set in the aftermath of the disaster. Without changing the story, (based on the manga by Furuya Minoru), Sono used the screenplay to deliver a rallying cry to the people of Japan.

*Himizu* is the story of 14-year-old Sumida (Shota Sometani) and his desperate struggle just to make an ordinary life for himself out of the dreadful circumstances fate has handed him. Left by his detestable parents to run a meagre boat-rental business, Sumida pursues his ambition to have no ambition. Even in the face of his endlessly sullen mood and hostile rebuffs, his adoring classmate Chazawa (Fumi Nikaido) hounds Sumida with her refrains, "Have a



**Kiseki (I Wish) by director Hirokazu Kore-eda was one of the many Japanese films screened at the 36th Toronto International Film Festival held from September 8 to 18.** Photo courtesy of TIFF

dream" and "Ganbare!" ("Don't give up!").

Sumida just happens to bump into criminals and psychopaths with improbable frequency, and the film depicts a certain degree of brutality,

but unlike the graphic horror films for which Sono is known, (*Suicide Club*, 2001; *Exte*, 2007; *Cold Fish* 2010), *Himizu* emphasizes the story rather than the gore. For their performances, Shota and Fumi won best

new actor and best new actress at this year's Venice Film Festival.

A bloodier but somewhat comedic film, from director Katsuhito Ishii (*Shark Skin Man and Peach Hip Girl*, 1998; *The Taste of Tea*, 2004), *Smuggler* is full of inventive slow-motion depictions of gangsters knocking the spit out of each other, in a most literal and graphic fashion. Satoshi Tsumabuki shows versatility as reluctant Kinuta, newly recruited as an underworld smuggler.

The acting, story and cinematography are deftly handled, and Ishii has effectively translated to the screen the manga by Shohei Manabe, but while there are some hilarious characters and scenes in *Smuggler*, presenting the torturer as an absurd diaper-wearing, be-goggled pain fetishist does not make the long, stomach-turning torture scene laughable. During the Q&A after the late-night "Midnight Madness" screening, *Nikkei Voice* asked director Ishii, "Wouldn't the film be more entertaining with less torture?" The rowdy, giddy audience protested "No!" and then Ishii confessed, "I originally wanted to make that torture scene longer," but the film's sponsors wouldn't allow it. This made the audience laugh again.

Innocent and thoughtful, *Kiseki* ("I Wish") is a film that shows growth. "This is my seventh time at TIFF," said writer-director Hirokazu Kore-

See TIFF P. 10

10 - Nikkei Voice, October 2011

### TIFF from page 7

eda (*Air Doll*, 2009), who was in attendance. Although a less harrowing story than his *Nobody Knows* (for which 14-year-old Yuya Yagira won Best Actor at Cannes International Film Festival, 2004), this film again depicts children taking responsibility for their destinies while their immature parents muddle through life. In *Kiseki*, two young brothers (which the actors are), each being raised by one parent in separate cities, agree to meet in between at Kumamoto to make a wish at the very place and moment that the new bullet trains will pass each other for the first time. The seven child actors, some of them new to acting, carry the story with great success. Kore-eda explained, during the post-screening Q&A, that the children were cast based on their ability to improvise. *Nikkei Voice* asked Kore-eda whether he makes his films for a Japanese audience or an international audience. "Both," he replied. "I make a film for an individual. This film I made for my four-year-old daughter."

Far from being a mere feel-good movie, Kore-eda has pulled together a story and performances that resonate deep in the mind. Not simply happy or sad or nostalgic, *Kiseki* is an irresistibly satisfying portrayal of children beginning to make sense of what life holds in store for them.