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THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Movies

Toilet: A Japanese film set in the U.S., by way of Toronto

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At first flush, *Toilet* seems like an odd title for a movie – especially one the tourism officials are using to promote Toronto to the Japanese.

While a bathroom fixture does figure significantly in the film, it's Japanese director Naoko Ogigami's use of Toronto locations such as High Park and the Kensington and St. Lawrence markets, as well as *Toilet*'s sweet inter-generational story, that inspired a campaign to entice young tourists to visit Toronto.

Toilet, which receives its North American premiere at the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival this weekend, is the second film that Ogigami has shot a film outside her country – a rare move among Japanese moviemakers.

“I am always interested in cultural differences between countries,” said Ogigami via e-mail from the Rome film festival, where *Toilet* just screened. “I wanted to make a film in North America, and Toronto has such beautiful nature and old houses.”

The film tells the story of three 20-something siblings – Ray, a super-nerd engineer (Alex House); Maury, a pianist suffering panic attacks (David Rendall); and Lisa, an aspiring poet and air-guitarist (Tatiana Maslany) – living and squabbling under the same roof after the death of their mother.

Their recently arrived Japanese grandmother (Masako Motai), who doesn’t speak English, has a habit of sighing sadly every time she leaves the washroom. Ray suspects the reason is the toilet, and his search for one from Japan becomes his way of bridging the cultural and generational divide.

Ogigami lived for six years in California, where she studied film at the University of Southern California in the late 1990s and first gained international recognition with *Kamome Diner* (2006), which was shot in Finland. One of her Finnish crew members visited her in Japan and was fascinated by toilets that, well, do a thorough personal wash and dry automatically.

“For a Japanese person this toilet is very common, but for other people it is very special, so that’s where I got the idea,” Ogigami explains. “Also, when I lived in California, one of my Japanese-American friends has a grandmother who could not speak English. I always wonder how they communicate but somehow they are very close.”

Although the film’s story takes place somewhere in the eastern U.S., Toronto audiences will easily recognize downtown spots and appreciate the city’s charms as seen through fresh eyes. Ogigami was initially concerned about how *Toilet* would be received in Japan, where it opened in August. “Most young Japanese people don’t want to see films with subtitles these days, so I was worried,” she reports. “But a lot of young people came to see the film and it got good reviews.”

Reel Asian has a particularly strong lineup of Japanese fare this year, including Miwa Nishikawa’s award-winning *Dear Doctor* and thriller *Golden Slumber* from Yoshihiro Nakamura, whose *Fish Story* won the fest’s audience award last year. The festival also celebrates animation innovator Koji Yamamura with a free (with registration) public workshop and screening of his 35 short works.

Two Canadian directors also confront their Japanese heritage on film. Louise Noguchi’s 30-minute *Marker* contrasts the romanticism of martyrdom in Japan and North America, while Jeff Chiba Stearns’ animated documentary *One Big Hapa Family* explores why 95 per cent of Japanese-Canadians marry interracially, more than any other ethnic group.

“*Hapa Family* is one of the most thorough, fun and open-ended pieces I’ve seen about how young people perceive their mixed-race identities,” says Reel Asian artistic director Heather Keung. “And, in one way, it is similar to *Toilet* in that both tell stories about

young people who have grown up in North America and how they navigate that generation and culture gap."

FESTIVAL QUICK PICKS

Home
Desiree Lim's Home is an experimental docudrama looking at the plight of Burmese refugees. Screens Wednesday, 6:30 p.m.

Redress Remix
Lesley Loksi Chan uses animation techniques and testimonials to explore the impact of the Canadian government's official 2006 apology to Chinese Canadians for the head tax and exclusion act of 1923. Screens Wednesday, 11 a.m.

Dooman River
Director Lu Zhang follows the friendship between a Chinese boy and a starving Korean boy who has escaped from North Korea to find food for his sick sister. The film won a Crystal Bear Special Mention in Berlin earlier this year. Screens Wednesday, 8 p.m.

Au Revoir Taipei
This Taipei film – a light-hearted, late-night love story and multiple award-winner – closes the festival and gets an encore screening Mon. Nov. 15 at the Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts. Screens Sunday, 8 p.m.

Reel Asian runs until Sunday. For details, visit www.reelasian.com.

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