



ANIME

Belle

(Ryû to sobakasu no hime)

The roots of *Belle*, Hosoda Mamoru's electrifying tale of human connection in an increasingly online world, can be traced back almost 30 years. Animation can be a punishing profession, and a young Hosoda, a year or two into his tenure as an animator for Japanese studio Toei, was struggling with the long hours and low pay that plague the anime industry. 'I was really wondering if I could stick with it,' Hosoda recalls, talking to me the day after *Belle*'s UK premiere at the BFI London Film Festival last October. But then a transformative trip to the cinema changed the course of his career.

The year was 1992, when the latest opus from the so-called Disney renaissance had just reached Japanese shores: *Beauty and the Beast*. 'I was so impressed by it, and by what animation could do, that it inspired me to keep going,' Hosoda says. Specifically, he was inspired by the work of Glen Keane, one of Disney's leading animators of the time, who brought to life many of the period's most enduring characters: Ariel (in *The Little Mermaid*, 1989), Aladdin and, most importantly to Hosoda, the Beast. 'I had such great respect for him and I thought, "I want to be like him one day".'

That drive has served Hosoda well. Over the following years, he would rise through the ranks at Toei to the role of director, move into feature film work, win international acclaim and box-office success back home with *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* (2006) and *Summer Wars* (2009), before eventually going independent and setting up his own company, Studio Chizu, in 2011. Films such as *Wolf Children* (2012), *The Boy and the Beast* (2015) and *Mirai* (2018) solidified Hosoda's reputation as a popular filmmaker adept at combining resonant personal themes, often inspired by his own family life, with complex metaphorical storytelling devices.

Hosoda grappled for decades with how to create his response to Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. Finally, 30 years on, inspiration struck. 'My original idea was: what would happen if I would try and tell this story of *Beauty and the Beast* in an online world? The Beast has this duality, or two sides of himself, and it's the same when you go online. You have yourself, and your online self. And you discover yourself through this process – you might not even have realised that there is another you inside.'

As with *Mirai* and *The Boy and the Beast*, the young character at the heart of *Belle* was informed by the everyday experiences of Hosoda's children, in this case his five-year-old daughter. 'When my daughter is at home she's really lively,' he explains. 'She does whatever she likes. But at nursery she's very shy and very timid. She's only got one friend. And I started to worry: how will she survive when she grows up and she's got a phone and she's got to navigate social media? What will other people think of her? How will she manage? I wanted to tell a story of how someone like that can find their own identity and grow in this new world.'

The film's protagonist, Suzu, isn't five: she's a troubled teenager mourning for a lost parent. She is desperately searching for selfhood in the high-stakes social world of high school, until she logs on to the vibrant, virtual world of 'U' – an app that scans a user's biometric data to create an avatar that best

expresses their inner spirit. Hosoda contrasts the humdrum real world, rendered in a familiar, grounded 'slice of life' anime style, with the slick, brightly coloured, sensory-overload CG wonderland of U, where characters congregate in their billions amid impossible architecture that juxtaposes densely packed banks of servers and skyscrapers. The internet serves as an exaggerated virtual stage for our heroine's personal journey. Online, Suzu is transformed into a glamorous, graceful pop diva, Belle, whose songs touch the hearts of her fellow U users.

An overnight sensation, she soon becomes the community's most beloved character, contrasting with its most reviled: the mysterious, grotesque Dragon, known as 'Beast', who is being hunted by the corporate-sponsored online cops, the Justices.

Awkward teen melodrama, animalistic outsiders, the internet: all of this may be familiar territory for Hosoda, but he is as ever engaged with the current cultural moment. Ever since the short spin-off film *Digimon Adventure: Our War Game!* in 2000, he has been responding to the developing role that the internet plays in our everyday lives and in society at large. 'I have been making films about the internet for 20 years now, even though the internet's really only been around for 25 years. Back then, it was full of hope: it was a tool that young people were going to use to change the world. Now, it seems like the internet is no longer as full of hope as it used to be.'

That ambivalence is hinted at through Belle's personal experience, as she receives her fair share of thoughtless negative comments from other users, but it is also evident throughout the world of U. A controversial figure like the Beast fuels fierce debate and rampant speculation among the user community, a discourse fed by the Justices even though his actual misdemeanours remain unclear: a diversionary spectacle that helps maintain the status quo for an online empire.

Hosoda still claims to be an idealist about the potential of the internet, and how it provides a space for young people to express themselves outside of the pressures of everyday life. Yet he is clear-eyed about its problems, and the role played by the companies that control so many of the platforms and services we use on a daily basis, many of which are now embracing the concept of an always-online metaverse not too dissimilar from the one depicted in *Belle*: 'All of the issues that we have with the internet – the trolling, the fake news, the loss of political neutrality – they're all linked to Facebook. The metaverse is a global trend right now, but we've always had two worlds: the real world and the online world. It's no longer the case that the online world is a fictional, made-up fantasy world – the online world is just as real as the real world, it's a second reality.'

It's telling, then, that *Belle*'s powerful conclusion sees Suzu reaching outside of the virtual world to make a real-world human connection. *Belle* is ultimately a story of empathy in the face of prejudice, much like the film that inspired Hosoda back in 1992: 'What I like about the story of *Beauty and the Beast* is the reversal of values, and how our expectations are overturned,' Hosoda says. 'The Beast has this violent exterior, this horrible temper, but that's not all there is to him. There's a different person inside. And I've always thought about how to depict that.'

Michael Leader, *Sight and Sound*, March 2022

BELLE (RYŪ TO SOBAKASU NO HIME)

Director: Mamoru Hosoda
©: Studio Chizu
Production Company: Studio Chizu
Planned and Produced by: Studio Chizu
Producers: Yuichiro Saito, Genki Kawamura, Nozomu Takahashi, Toshimi Tanio
Screenplay: Mamoru Hosoda
Animation Director: Hiroyuki Aoyama
CG Animation Supervisor: Takaaki Yamashita
CG Director: Ryo Horibe, Yohei Shimozawa
Editor: Shigeru Nishiyama
Production Designers: Anri Jojo, Eric Wong
Art Director: Nobutaka Ike
CG Character Designers: Kim Jin, Kageichi Akiya
Music: Ludvig Forssell, Yuta Bando
Music Director: Taisei Iwasaki

Voice Cast

Kaho Nakamura (*Suzu/Belle*)
Takeru Satoh (*the creature/Kei*)
Kôji Yakusho (*Suzu's father*)
Lilas Ikuta (*Hiro*)
Ryô Narita (*Shinobu*)
Shota Sometani (*Kamishin*)
Tina Tamashiro (*Luka*)
Toshiyuki Morikawa (*Justin*)
Fuyumi Sakamoto (*Okumoto*)
Kenjiro Tsuda (*Jellinek*)
Mami Koyama (*Swan*)
Mamoru Miyano (*Hitokawa Muitaro/Gutto koraemaru*)
Michiko Shimizu (*Kita*)
Ryoko Moriyama (*Yoshitani*)
Sachiyo Nakao (*Hatanaka*)
Yoshimi Iwasaki (*Nakai*)

Japan 2021
121 mins

ANIME AT THE IMAX

Ghost in the Shell (Kôkaku Kidôtai)

Mon 25 Apr 15:00, 21:00

Belle (Ryû to sobakasu no hime)

Thu 31 Mar 20:40 (NFT1); Mon 25 Apr 18:15

THE HISTORY OF ANIME

Early Days of Anime Shorts Programme 1917-1946

Tue 29 Mar 18:00; Mon 11 Apr 20:40

Momotaro's Divine Sea Warriors (Momotarô: Umi no Shinpei)

Wed 30 Mar 21:00; Wed 13 Apr 18:30

Astroboy

Fri 1 Apr 18:15; Sun 17 Apr 12:10

Kimba the White Lion (Jangaru Taitei)

Fri 1 Apr 20:45; Sat 9 Apr 12:40

Belladonna of Sadness (Kanashimi no Belladonna)

Mon 4 Apr 20:30 (+ intro by Helen McCarthy);

Mon 18 Apr 15:30

EMERGING FEMALE VOICES

A Silent Voice (Koe no Katachi)

Wed 6 Apr 20:30; Mon 18 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Dr Rayna Denison, Professor in Film and Digital Arts, University of Bristol)

The Anthem of the Heart (Kokoro ga Sakebitagatterunda)

Thu 7 Apr 20:30; Fri 22 Apr 18:10

Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms (Sayonara no Asa ni Yakusoku no Hana o Kazarô)

Fri 8 Apr 18:00; Sat 23 Apr 17:45

Liz and the Blue Bird (Rizu to aoi tori)

Thu 21 Apr 18:15; Sat 30 Apr 17:45

ANIME CLASSICS PART 1

Steamboy (Suchimubô)

Sat 9 Apr 20:20; Fri 15 Apr 20:30; Wed 20 Apr 18:10

Royal Space Force: The Wings of Honneamise (Ôritsu Uchûgun: Oneamisu no Tsubasa)

Tue 12 Apr 18:00; Sat 23 Apr 20:40

Patlabor: The Movie (Kidô keisatsu patorebâ: Gekijô-ban)

Wed 13 Apr 20:40; Sun 17 Apr 18:20; Thu 28 Apr 18:15

Cowboy Bebop: The Movie (Cowboy Bebop: Tengoku no tobira)

Thu 14 Apr 20:45; Sat 16 Apr 20:30; Fri 22 Apr 20:40

Patlabor 2: The Movie (Kidô keisatsu patorebâ: The Movie 2)

Fri 15 Apr 18:15; Thu 21 Apr 20:30; Thu 28 Apr 20:45

The Case of Hana & Alice (Hana to Arisu Satsujin Jiken)

Sat 16 Apr 18:35; Tue 26 Apr 20:55

STUDIO GHIBLI

Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi)

Mon 28 Mar 20:35; Fri 29 Apr 18:00

When Marnie Was There (Omoide No Mani)

Tue 29 Mar 20:40

My Neighbour Totoro (Tonari no Totoro)

Tue 5 Apr 18:20; Fri 8 Apr 20:50

This season was co-programmed by writer and academic Hanako Miyata



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