



ANIME

The Tale of The Princess Kaguya

The plan was to release *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya* in Japan on the same day as *The Wind Rises*, 25 years after the double-bill of Isao Takahata's *Grave of the Fireflies* and Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbour Totoro* put their fledgling Studio Ghibli on the map.

This time Takahata had had a five-year head start, but still missed their summer 2013 release date, and was head-down at work in Ghibli's custom-established Studio 7 when the TV showed Miyazaki broadcasting his retirement. 'Announcing it to the press is what's weird,' Takahata mutters in a useful documentary tracking *Kaguya's* tortuous making. Miyazaki had invited him to share his press-conference stage, but he'd declined.

'By nature he is a real slugabed sloth... the descendant of some giant sloth that once crawled the plains of earth in the Pliocene era,' says Miyazaki of his friend, colleague and inspiration Paku-san in *Starting Point*, the first volume of Miyazaki's collected writings and interviews. (Why 'Paku-san'? 'The story is that every day he would arrive just barely on time, drinking tap water and wolfing down bread. He sounded like this: paku, paku.') 'With Paku-san,' he adds, 'you can be guaranteed that at several points in the production he will begin yelling, "I can't possibly make this film!"'

Takahata himself, in the epilogue to *Starting Point*, writes: 'Miya-san has always aggressively tried to assume responsibility for various things, but at some unknown point I – the giant sloth – began to sneakily avoid responsibility. And since Miya-san is responsible for Studio Ghibli, whenever I do any work I have tended to create a great deal of trouble for him by, among other things, causing delays in production schedules.'

And not only for Miyazaki. Toshio Suzuki, Ghibli's third founding musketeer, declined to produce the film because he couldn't give Takahata the requisite 24/7 attention – during this period he produced *Tales from Earthsea* (2006), *Ponyo* (2008), *Arrietty* (2010), *From up on Poppy Hill* (2011) and *The Wind Rises* (2013). Instead it fell on young first-time producer Yoshiaki Nishimura – not unfairly, as he'd spent 18 months back in 2005-06 trying to motivate a reluctant Takahata to undertake the project. 'It's that simple: I really want to see Isao Takahata's last movie,' he says in the making-of doc. Five years later, they had 30 minutes of storyboard.

The irony is that *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya* itself is a lamentation for time's hasty passage – animated in a fleet brushstroke style that exudes spontaneity and swiftness. It's a radical look – at least for studio-produced feature animation – that harks back to Japanese woodblock and scroll art, here used to animate Takahata's version of Japan's oldest-recorded folk tale, which dates back at least a millennium.

More commonly titled *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, it concerns the eponymous farmer's discovery inside a luminous bamboo shoot of a tiny girl whom he and his wife raise as their daughter, with financial assistance provided by nuggets of gold he finds in further shoots of bamboo; taking

these as a sign, they name her Princess Kaguya, meaning 'shining light'. Spurred, as she grows up, by her great and refined beauty, a series of increasingly noble admirers come with fanciful tributes to solicit her as their bride, but she sends them all away on impossible errands, only to find herself rueing her own foreshortened time on earth.

Takahata has equivocated about whether to call this his last film. ('If I still have the physical stamina, will, and mental powers left in me, and there are people who will invest in it, a producer who will manage it all, and if I am blessed with the kind of collaborators I had on this project, I would like to make another film,' he told Bill Desowitz for *Indiewire*. 'But this would require a miracle, so when I consider whether it is possible or impossible, I think it is more likely to be impossible.')

Still, as with *The Wind Rises* there's certainly a valedictory air to it, a nostalgic genius for reincarnating the moments that, in Miyazaki's words, make 'this life worth living'. The film's first act exalts in a pastoralism, and the alignment of nature and high-spirited youth, the raw ingredients of so many Ghibli movies, as Kaguya grows up hymning 'birds, bugs, beasts, grass, trees, flowers', relishing the taste of melons and forest fruits, the company of animals and her peasant friends, who snub her father's airs and nickname her 'L'il Bamboo'.

This is what Miyazaki calls Takahata's everyday-life animation, a move away from the fantasy and fabular heroism of most cartoons – including Takahata's 1968 feature debut *The Little Norse Prince* (aka *Horus, Prince of the Sun*), on which Miyazaki worked, and indeed most of Miyazaki's own movies – towards a realism of setting and narrative, begun with *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*, the 1974 TV series on which the pair collaborated.

The observational precision and exuberance with which Kaguya's first baby rolls and steps are animated fully bear out Takahata's claims for his experimental style, and for building his production around key singular talents. Kazuo Oga's backgrounds are synonymous with Studio Ghibli productions, but he'd not art-directed for the studio since Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* in 1997; here, extending the idea of incomplete, piecemeal backgrounds begun in Takahata's last feature, the newspaper comic strip-adapted *My Neighbours the Yamadas* (1999), he composes in limpid watercolours and diaphanous backgrounds that fade off into a kind of cartoon negative space, emphasising (in this case) the realism of the foreground actions, and their occasional outbursts of expressionism.

The younger Osamu Tanabe, who has worked on all of Takahata's Ghibli animation, provides the character designs, his rough line-drawings traced over with rare lightness by the animators without any clean-up stage. 'I've believed this for 50 years: when you're drawing fast there's passion,' Takahata explains. 'With a carefully finished product that passion gets lost.'

Kaguya's delay also meant Takahata was able to score the services of Miyazaki's perennial composer Joe Hisaishi, first brought into the fold by Takahata as producer on Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), the film whose success launched Studio Ghibli.

The twist in this first act is that Kaguya grows up inhumanly fast – though her blink-and-she's-sprouted-again transformations may strike a familiar note for any watching parents. The movie telescopes time like *Only Yesterday* (1991), Takahata's adaptation of Hotaru Okamoto and Yuko Tone's nostalgic manga, whose memories of a girl's childhood in 1966 Tokyo are refracted in the

movie through the belated soul-searching of her rather Rohmeresque, unassertive 27-year-old self on a farming holiday in the countryside.

Which is to say that *Princess Kaguya* soon leaves behind the bucolic comradeship of *Panda! Go Panda!* (1972), *Goshu, the Cellist* (1982) and *Pom Poko* (1994), Takahata's fables of nature seeking accommodation with man, for another Ghibli commonplace: the follies of human greed and aggrandisement. The newly enriched, socially aspirational cutter removes his family from the fields to a dedicated palace where he lavishes his princess with robes, and lessons in the arts and graces of Japanese medieval ladyhood at the hands of the humourless Lady Sagami. ('A lady does not sweat,' Sagami pronounces, struggling to impose the plucking custom of *hikimayu* on Kaguya's eyebrows, as well as the black-dyeing of her teeth through the practice of *ohaguro*.)

But it's Kaguya's free spirit that's most in contention here: the bamboo cutter wants none of her old 'hillbilly' friends at her coming-of-age party, designed to show her off to 'name guests'. And while the style with which she dispatches her five noble suitors to find the impossible objects to which they have compared her will tickle feminist sensibilities, faintly echoing the spunkiness we love in Miyazaki's heroines, it remains the circumscribed manoeuvre of a girl with only the power of refusal. Never has a Ghibli film strayed so far into the social pessimism of a Kenji Mizoguchi tragedy.

Nick Bradshaw, *Sight & Sound*, April 2015

THE TALE OF THE PRINCESS KAGUYA (KAGUYA-HIME NO MONOGATARI)

Director: Isao Takahata

©: Hatake Jimusho, GNDHDDTK

A Studio Ghibli production

Presented by: Studio Ghibli, Nippon Television Network Corporation, Dentsu, Hakuodo DY Media Partners, Walt Disney Japan, Mitsubishi, Toho, KDDI

Producers: Nishimura Yoshiaki, Toshio Suzuki, Ujii Seichiro

Planning: Toshio Suzuki

Post-production: Tamaki Kojo

CASTING: Queen's Promotion, Keiko Ogata, Kaori Sakai, Hazuki Yamamura

Written by: Isao Takahata, Sakaguchi Riko

Director of Digital Imaging: Keisuke Nakamura

Character Design and Directing Animators: Osamu Tanabe, Kenichi Konishim

Editing: Toshihiko Kojima

Art Director: Kazuo Oga

Titles: Malin Post

Colour Setting: Yukiko Kakita

Music: Joe Hisaishi

Music Performed by: Tokyo Symphony Orchestra

Conductor: Joe Hisaishi

Sound Designer: Naoko Asari

Re-recording Mixer: Koji Kasamatsu

Digital Lab: Imagic

Voice Cast:

Asakura Aki (*Princess Kaguya, 'Li'l Bamboo'*)

Kora Kengo (*Sutemaru*)

Chii Takeo (*Okina, bamboo cutter*)

Miyamoto Nobuko (*Ona, bamboo cutter's wife/narrator*)

Takahata Atsuko (*Lady Sagami*)

Tomoko Tabata (*Menowarawa*)

Shinosuke Tatekawa (*Inbe no Akita*)

Takaya Kamikawa (*Prince Ishitsukuri*)

Hikaru Ijuin (*Minister of Finance*)

Ryudo Uzaki (*Minister of the Military*)

Shichinosuke Nakamura (*Mikado*)

Isao Hashizume (*Minister of Culture*)

Japan 2013©

137 mins

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



Japan Nakama is an online community for Japanese culture enthusiasts and a marketplace for Japan-made and inspired products.

ANIME CLASSICS PART 2

Tekkonkinkreet (Tekkon kinkurīto) Sun 1 May 12:10; Thu 5 May 20:50

The Tale of the Princess Kaguya (Kaguya-hime no Monogatari)

Tue 3 May 14:00; Tue 3 May 17:30 (all BFI IMAX)

Akira Tue 3 May 20:30; Mon 23 May 15:00;

Mon 23 May 20:30 (all BFI IMAX)

Lupin the 3rd: The Castle of Cagliostro (Kariosutoro no Shiro)

Wed 4 May 14:30; Tue 31 May 20:45

Fullmetal Alchemist the Movie: Conqueror of Shamballa

(Gekijō-ban Hagane no Renkinjutsushi: Shanbara o Yuku Mono)

Fri 6 May 21:00; Mon 9 May 20:40

Memories (Memorīzu) Sun 15 May 12:00; Tue 24 May 20:40

Grave of the Fireflies (Hotaru no Haka)

Thu 19 May 18:00 + intro by Alex Dudok de Wit, author of BFI Film

Classics: Grave of the Fireflies; Fri 27 May 20:45