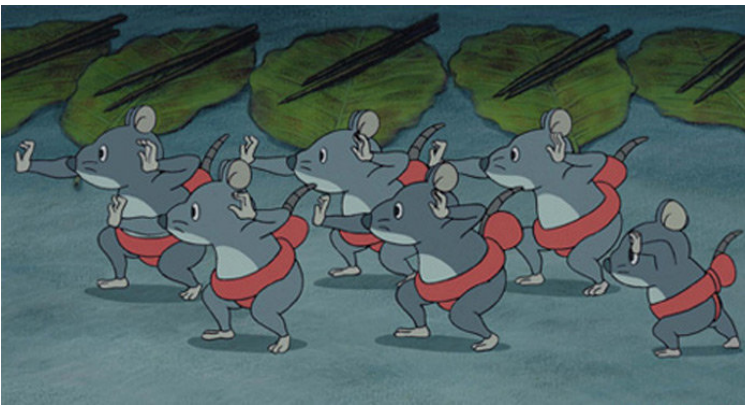


Notebook Feature

勝手にしやがれ #6. Mighty Mice: Hayao Miyazaki's "Chuo- Zumo"

Stephen Sarrazin • 01 DEC 2010

勝手にしやがれ : Japanese Film & Media On Its Own Terms



Possibly the most interesting feature of the Ghibli Museum, located in Mitaka, is its small movie theater. It's here that audiences can discover new and unreleased shorts by Hayao Miyazaki. Having concluded a baroque trilogy that includes *Spirited Away*, *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Ponyo on the Cliff*, all elaborate fantasy pieces, Miyazaki returns to the charm,

the wonder of other worlds waiting around the corner, that informed what are undoubtedly two of his greatest works, the seminal *My Neighbor Totoro*, and the elegant *Whisper of the Heart*, for which he co-wrote the screenplay.

Chu-Zumo is a period piece, in which an old farming couple live alone atop a mountain side. It's been a very long time since Miyazaki shone a light on his own generation; there are no young heroines to be found here. Sophie's grand old age in *Howl*, we may recall, resulted from a curse. This time around, the farmers are old, still robust, but their spines have begun to curve. Husband and wife never exchange a word, and days consist of planting and harvesting, a simple dinner, an early night.

As would be expected in the countryside, the old couple actually share the house with country mice, small, shy, prudent creatures with a clever look and a soft brown coat. One night, stirred in the midst of sleep, the husband finds his "flock" of mice heading for the forest, where he witnesses an unsuspected form of entertainment that will reawaken his life. The mice engage in bouts of sumo against the plump white "rikishi" mice of the fields, thrice their size, under the supervision of a strict frog referee draped in the attire of a gyoji, surrounded by five other shinpan frogs.

The house mice are defeated to the chagrin and resentment of the farmer, who shares the tale with his wife. Both agree that their modest home shall become a great house of sumo and proceed to serve a considerable feast to their wrestlers. The entire sequence consisting in the preparation of the meal and the noble manner in which it is consumed stands out as a return to form for Miyazaki as a return to a sensibility of earlier works, elaborate and stunning, hilarious and moving. It is as if the filmmaker wanted to provide some measure of dignity to a national sport marred by scandal in recent years.

The country mice, sporting brand new bellies, return to face their still more massive opponents, cheered on by the farmer and his wife. This time Miyazaki observes all the sumo rituals, throwing the pinch of salt in the ring to purify it, the reward given the winner by the referee, the mice spectators throwing their pillow seats at the end of a drawn out struggle. The clever smaller opponent, a reminder of the wonderful wresler Minoumi, wins the day, and the lot returns to celebrate, before going back to training, and back to the soil.

Studio Ghibli releaed *Chu-Zumo* the same year as its most recent feature, *Arrietty*, directed by Hiromisa Yonebayashi, a long-time animator, artist and Miyazaki collaborator, which

highlighted the fact that although Ghibli is teeming with gifted craftsmen, there is only one Miyazaki. The disappointing box office results of *Arrietty* have again fueled discussion as to the great animation studio's future. Ghibli has been slow and reluctant to let other animators from within take a stab at directing, let alone inviting someone from the outside to helm a project. Ghibli's activities in the future might limit themselves to handling and managing its collection.

In the meantime, Isao Takahata continues to work on his long-awaited new feature, and Hayao Miyazaki has spoken of a new project. *Chu-Zumo* will not be screened abroad, but the great director, who has announced time and time again that he would be retiring, just made us very hungry for more.

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