

spotlight

Wim Wenders' 'Perfect Days' is not about toilets

Oscar-nominated film prompts reflections on urban solitude

Film

KATIE FORSTER AND NATSUKO FUKUE
AFP-Jiji

When German director Wim Wenders revealed his latest inspiration — Tokyo's public toilets — newspapers in his country "treated it like a joke," but now the film "Perfect Days" has been nominated for an Oscar. "Toilets are the opposite of culture" in Europe, the arthouse great says in an online video interview. But in Japan, where the film is set, "that is not the case."

The movie's taciturn main character is a cleaner who ensures that a set of toilets in downtown Tokyo, designed by famous architects, are kept spotless. He is meticulous in both his job and his habits, but as the days go by, the complexity of his situation comes to light, prompting reflections on urban solitude, community and growing older.

Wenders says his critics had "realized how much this film is not about toilets."

"But toilets are part of it, and toilets are part of a very specifically Japanese sense of welcoming... and a sense of respect for this very human need that we all have."

"Perfect Days" is a finalist for best international feature at the March 10 Academy Awards, after star Koji Yakusho won best actor at Cannes for his performance. It's yet another eclectic subject for Wenders, 78, whose cult works include the drifter drama "Paris, Texas" and documentaries such as "Buena Vista Social Club."

Back in 2020, the German was "heartbroken" to see how "the sense of the common good had really suffered in the pandemic," with rubbish strewn across Berlin parks. Then Koji Yana, son of the multi-billionaire founder of Japanese clothing giant Uniqlo, got in touch. He invited Wenders to tour his



toilet renovation project, hoping to inspire a series of short nonfiction films.

After seeing some of the 17 facilities, including one with transparent cubicles that turn opaque when the door is locked, the director decided to make a full-length feature. Impressed by the "sense of responsibility" in Japan, "I realized there was a bigger story to tell," he says.

Countries submit one film each year in the Oscars' best international feature category, and "Perfect Days" is Japan's first entry by a non-Japanese director. Wenders, who has never won an Oscar despite his documentaries being nominated three times, co-wrote the script with top advertising creative Takuma Takasaki. The shoot was finished quickly, in around a fortnight, and the pair kept the film's dialogue sparse to ease the language barrier.

"The main language in movies is still the eyes," Wenders says.

His first task was to scout key locations such as the protagonist Hiramaya's modest home in the shadow of the futuristic Skytree broadcast tower. Hiramaya's daily trips to public baths and underground restaurants after driving home from work through

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'PERFECT DAYS' DIRECTOR WIM WENDERS

Tokyo's spaghetti junctions are as much part of the film as the toilets he cleans.

"It's the only city I know where everything is on top of each other, and I like that so much," Wenders says.

The director had already worked in the capital — 1985's "Tokyo-Ga" was a homage to cinematic master Yasujiro Ozu — and says it would be a "dream come true" to do so again. Next up could be an as-yet-unwritten project set in both Tokyo and space, but at 78 years old, "every movie I do will eliminate others I can do."

"When I was young, I thought I had a countless number of movies in me, and now I know I've got to be very careful," he says.

"Perfect Days" allowed Wenders to express

an "appreciation of Japanese culture that I hadn't been able to express before." For example, "komorebi": a Japanese word for the quality of light as it filters through the trees, as captured by Hiramaya on a film camera during his lunch breaks. Wenders was impressed that a word exists to describe these "beautiful little spectacles we see sometimes on the wall, or the floor."

To him that represents an "appreciation of the small things we take for granted, or don't even see," he says.

Some critics have said Hiramaya's life is too romanticized, but for Yakusho, the role had its benefits. The intricate toilet-cleaning methods he learned reminded him of the "job of a monk in training," the actor says.

Hiramaya's daily routines, from watering his saplings to buying vending machine coffee or listening to cassette tapes in the car, also carried their lessons.

"When the film was finished, I felt some envy watching Hiramaya finding real, small joys in various things," Yakusho says. "Thinking it might be a very good thing to look up at the sky and take a few deep breaths in the morning when I come out my front door, I sometimes remind myself to do that."

Japanese star Koji Yakusho (right) won best actor at Cannes last year for his performance in Wim Wenders' film 'Perfect Days.'

AFP-Jiji



A young woman (Arisu Maeda, right) reveals a traumatic event from her past to a one-night stand (Ryota Bando) in "Voice." © BOUQUET GARNI FILMS

Lead actors' raw performances knit together moving omnibus

Film: Review

Voice

(Japanese title: Ichigatsu no Koe ni Yoro-kobi o Kizame)

★★★★☆

118 MINS.; JAPANESE; NOW SHOWING

MARK SCHILLING

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Japanese omnibus films have long showcased new and upcoming directors, while critics have tended to grade their segments from the strongest to the weakest. But veteran directors such as Ryusuke Hamaguchi ("Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy," 2021) and Mayu Nakamura ("She Is Me, I Am Her," 2022) have recently released omnibuses of uniformly excellent quality, making the ranking-chart review seem beside the point.

That is also true of Yukiko Mishima's new omnibus on the theme of life-long trauma, "Voice." Scripted and co-produced by Mishima, the film was inspired by the director's own experience with sexual assault when she was a child. It does not, however, tip over into personal confession.

The film uses a variety of narrative strategies and stylistic tropes to knit its three segments into a coherent, powerful whole, as its protagonists reveal with raw immediacy the emotional wounds that decades have not healed.

The three standalone segments unfold in widely separated parts of Japan but all feature boats and bodies of water, which strengthen the symbolic connection between the main characters, who have all embarked on long, lonely psychic voyages.

The first protagonist we meet is Maki (Maki Carroussel), a transgender woman living alone in a spacious villa by Lake Toya in Hokkaido. As the segment opens, she is preparing New Year's dishes that look as though they belong on the pages of a lifestyle magazine.

But when her daughter Masako (Reiko Kataoka) arrives with her husband and teenage daughter, the tension is palpable. Masako has long resented Maki for favoring her sister, Reiko, who died under tragic circumstances after being sexually abused 47 years earlier. In a searing performance by veteran trans talent Carroussel, we see that the pain of Reiko's death has never diminished.

The scene shifts to Hachioji, an island south of Tokyo that was once a place of exile. Islanders, the audience is told, have traditionally used taiko drums to not only perform in a distinctive style but also to communicate their feelings to each other. In this segment, we meet a rough-hewn farmer (Shou Aikawa) confronted with the sudden return of his daughter, Umi (Kiyo Matsumoto), whom he raised after her mother died.

Though it has been five years since father and daughter have seen each other, and Umi is obviously pregnant, the reunion is an awkward one. Umi tries to deny her condition, but when her father finds out her partner has seemingly left her in the lurch, angry drumming can be heard on the soundtrack. A former star of straight-to-video gangster films, Aikawa is relatable human as the father while giving his role the needed unpredictable edge.

We next meet Reiko (Arisu Maeda), who steps off a ferry to attend the funeral of a former boyfriend in the Dojima district of Osaka. While wandering alone afterward, she is approached by a hustler (Ryota Bando) who calls himself "Toto Moretti" and offers to be her lover for the night. Reiko decides to play along and, once they have become intimate, bluntly tells him why as memories of a childhood rape surface. Maeda's performance is chilling, moving and cathartic.

A final chapter juxtaposes Maki and Reiko, their experiences with trauma echoing each other, even as their responses — and fates — diverge. Especially in its first and last segments, "Voice" may feel like a descent into an eternal darkness of the soul, but it holds out the possibility of light if you don't let your past define you. Its accomplished director, more than anyone, should know.

When German director Wim Wenders (left) revealed his latest inspiration — Tokyo's public toilets — newspapers in his country "treated it like a joke," but now the film "Perfect Days" has been nominated for an Oscar. AFP-Jiji



Queen wraps marathon Rhapsody Tour at Tokyo Dome

Music

ALLAN RICHARZ
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

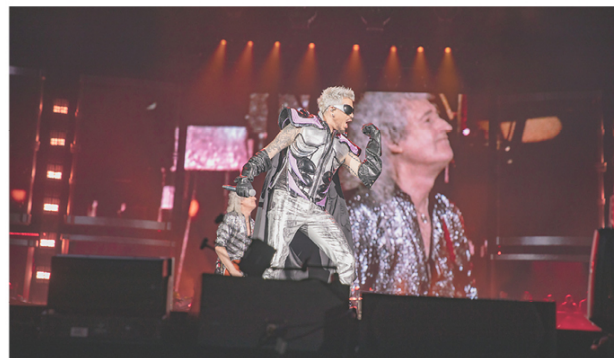
After 109 concerts in 20 countries, Queen + Adam Lambert's marathon Rhapsody Tour wrapped with a Valentine's Day performance at a packed Tokyo Dome, a venue that also saw major stars like Bruno Mars, Ed Sheeran and Taylor Swift light up its stage in recent weeks.

The final mini leg of The Rhapsody Tour, which hit Nagoya, Osaka, Sapporo and Tokyo this past month, provided fans with an appropriately grandiose send-off from the veteran rockers.

Kicking off in July 2019 in Vancouver, British Columbia, the tour saw the band — original members Brian May and Roger Taylor, along with vocalist Adam Lambert — perform multiple legs at arenas in Europe, North America and elsewhere.

The tour was not without its hiccups along the way. Guitarist May, 76, suffered a heart attack in 2020 and the tour experienced two pandemic-related postponements before its European portion was able to proceed in the summer of 2022.

But with a clean bill of health (May regularly posts cardio training photos and videos to his 3.5 million followers on Instagram while on tour), the band continued performing well-received shows around the world. Canadian music critic Jane Stevenson



Vocalist Adam Lambert (center) and original Queen members Brian May and Roger Taylor hit Nagoya, Osaka, Sapporo and Tokyo for the final leg of their marathon Rhapsody Tour. ALLAN RICHARZ

praised the "emotionally stunning" vocals of the band's October 2023 performance in Toronto, noting that frontman Adam Lambert was in "exceptional voice" that night.

Fittingly, the tour wrapped up in Japan, where Queen had its first taste of overseas success nearly 50 years ago. Much like the scene awaiting Queen when their flight touched down at Haneda Airport in 1975, the band was greeted by cheering fans as

they arrived in Tokyo at the end of January. For superfan Harumi Arita, who attended all five Japan shows, it was an overdue return.

"Queen was a unique band that broke the conventional wisdom of rock at the time with their complex compositions," said Arita of the band's initial success in Japan, adding that its folklore-heavy lyrics and early glam-rock aesthetic went well with fan sensibilities in Japan at the time.

This month's five dome shows were among the largest staged across The Rhapsody Tour, with the biggest of the Japanese venues holding around 55,000 spectators. Putting on such large shows was no mean feat, with production manager Paddy Hocken noting in an email to The Japan Times that the Dome leg used as many as 180 trucks between venues and over 300 local crew.

On opening night at Vantelin Dome

Nagoya, seats were filled to the very top row of the 49,000-seat arena, the distance from the stage, however, did nothing to dampen fans' enthusiasm as the band performed some of their biggest hits.

Closing out the tour at the Tokyo Dome, everyone looked to be in high spirits as the band took the stage, particularly a smiling May, as the rockers tore through hits "Radio Ga Ga," "Hammer to Fall" and "Fat Bottomed Girls."

The dome shows also featured the tour's updated stage presentation, including a sharp new color palette and new scenes of Japanese iconography displayed across towering LED screens.

As per tradition, Japanese fans were treated to an only-in-Japan addition to the setlist: "Toto Toriatte (Let Us Cling Together)," a Japanese-language song written by May in 1976 as a sign of appreciation for the band's devoted fanbase in the country.

Though the song is normally sung solo by May, Lambert surprised Dome audiences by joining in and singing an updated arrangement in which he made a commendable effort at the Japanese chorus.

Arita said the song was a highlight of her five-night experience and she praised May for speaking Japanese with the audience during concerts.

And so, as the curtain fell on The Rhapsody Tour, it was clear that even decades later, when it comes to Japan, Queen are the champions.