GHOST CAT ANZU



Directed by Yôko Kuno & Nobuhiro Yamashita
France, Japan | 2024 | 94 mins
Director’s Fortnight

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Synopsis

Karin, 11 years old, finds herself abandoned by her father in a small Japanese town, where her grandfather, a monk, resides. Her grandfather asks Anzu, his jovial and helpful, although rather capricious, ghost cat, to look after her. As their spirited personalities collide, sparks fly—yet perhaps only in the beginning.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

Based on Takashi Imashiro's manga of the same name, *Ghost Cat Anzu* begins with the encounter between a ghost cat and a young girl who moves to the countryside after being abandoned by her father.

In the original work, Anzu is a ghost cat living with a monk in a temple. Unlike the typical expectations associated with ghost cats, which are supposed to surprise and scare people, Anzu behaves like an idle old man: he aimlessly sleeps, works part-time as a massage therapist, and is seen urinating in front of the temple. To present Anzu in a more appealing light, the film required a character to contrast with him.

This is how we introduced the original character of Karin into the film, a girl as difficult to deal with as Anzu. Abandoned by her father, Karin doesn't hesitate to lie and be mean to Anzu. While Japanese animated films often feature cute and energetic girls, we wanted to introduce a more ordinary, capricious, and selfish character, reflecting the everyday life of Japanese girls.

Karin, a grumpy young girl, counterbalances Anzu's carefree attitude and offers the contrast between the characters. The same kind of contrast was needed for the settings. In the original manga, the story takes place in the town of Iketeru, a peaceful and universal rural area very commonplace in Japan. In order to make this countryside more appealing, we created universes that are completely opposite to it: Tokyo and Hell.

The film portrays several conflicts between Karin and Anzu, with the latter tasked with taking care of Karin. Her tantrums stem from her sole desire to see her deceased mother again. So, let's go find her mother! This is how Karin and Anzu embark on a journey to Hell. There, Karin puts her life at stake with the aim of bringing her mother back from Hell and to the world of the living.

Confronted with Karin's crime of daring to penetrate the gates of Hell, the demons and the god Enma cannot help but go to the world of the living, thus triggering chase scenes starting in Tokyo and spreading across the globe. *Ghost Cat Anzu* is a story that oscillates between tragedy and comedy, initiated by the simple wish of a young girl.

The production of the film relied on us for live-action shooting and for animation. The primary technique used is rotoscoping. Under Nobuhiro Yamashita's direction, the team filmed the movie in live-action, accompanied by a cinematographer and sound engineers. The live-action sequences were then meticulously redrawn frame by frame by the animation team led by Yoko Kuno.

Although rotoscoping is an animation technique that has been around for a long time, it is rarely used today. So, why did we choose this technique? Because it captures the actors' breathing, unexpected movements, and interactions. It is this "real" aspect that we sought. The exchanges of glances and the brief silences, which can only occur

between living people, are miracles. Drawing them solely from our imagination is extremely difficult. We consider making films to be an “observation.” Observing the accuracy of actors' performances, animation, editing, and sound. Rotoscoping, which allows us to have an observant eye throughout the film's production until the final stage, posed a challenge for our team. The moment we realized that this challenge was reflected in the film was when we fully appreciated the richness of cinema.

Most of the characters' voices were also recorded on location during live-action shooting. We sought as much realism as possible in the music and sound effects, which are closer to live-action than animation. While maintaining this realism, the audience should be able to enjoy the harmony between characters such as the rounder cat and frog and the consistency between realistic sounds and manga-style images.

Julien De Man drew many iconic Japanese landscapes from scenes filmed in live-action. The vibrant colors and subtle lines added to the scenery are reminiscent of Pierre Bonnard's neo-impressionist works, heavily influenced by Japanese art. These settings, which are imbued with such sensitivity, transcend borders,and present for the first time a Japan that had never been depicted before.

We are convinced that characters like Anzu and Karin, although unconventional, but certainly real, can gain authenticity through animation more than in a live-action film. These living characters go through life events, such as unexpected encounters and inevitable separations, as well as experiences firmly rooted in reality. By animating them, we sought to offer the audience a rewarding cinematic experience, combining the sweetness of a fairy tale with a realism more advanced than that of traditional live-action cinema.

- Yôko Kuno & Nobuhiro Yamashita



SCRIPTWRITER'S STATEMENT

On a rainy day, a monk in the Buddhist temple takes in an abandoned kitten that he names "Anzu" and takes great care of it. Strangely enough, even after 10 or 20 years, the kitten remains in good health and does not die. But, after 30 years, he becomes a yokai (a ghost).

This is how, at the beginning of his original manga, Takashi Imashiro explains how Anzu-chan became a yokai cat. In Japan, there is a tradition according to which a cat that lives too long becomes a yokai. Imashiro's work is based on this tradition but puts a spin on it.

Unlike most yokais, Anzu-chan does not curse or kill anyone. He is a good yokai who assists the monk and helps the villagers to solve their problems. He has a lot of offbeat charm. Nevertheless, he remains very "cat-like": fickle and unreliable. If something does not work as he wants, he gives up immediately.

In the end, he is rather good-for-nothing, but he is adorable. How do you get the best out of such a character? This question was fundamental in the adaptation of the original manga for cinema, because it was at the heart of the original work.

While writing the screenplay, I set myself another challenge: to invent a character that didn't exist in the original work. This became a little girl named Karin. As the manga is made up of a series of short stories, which are small warm episodes between Anzu and the inhabitants of the village, in order for this story to work as a feature film and not as a series of short stories, I had to add something to it. This is how the character of Karin brought a new charm to the film.

Karin is a 11 year old girl. Her mother having died a few years earlier, she lives alone in Tokyo with her father who is not very responsible. So I decided to start the story with Karin's arrival in this strange village where yokais live.

Anzu-chan will end up taking care of the child, whose naivety doesn't make it any easier for her to integrate into the community. At the beginning, communication is difficult between Karin, a strange little girl who grew up in Tokyo, and Anzu-chan, the fickle and unreliable yokai cat. But Anzu-chan does his best to replace Karin's parents, and Karin ends up accepting him. This evolution of their relationship, which is the core of the narrative, helps the villagers and the yokai to grow. In other words, it exemplifies how small changes can bring about big changes.

While the film depicts things that have not changed for centuries, such as the magnificence of nature and the tradition of the yokai, it also depicts the inevitable changes that mark our lives and the importance of accepting these changes. Indeed, it is the ability to accept people who live differently or in a different environment and are at risk of being pushed aside by society that allows each of us to evolve.

That’s why the script of the film is both simple and complex. It is a story that takes place in a small rural town in Japan but can find a deep resonance in everyone’s mind. I hope that this film will appeal to audiences all over the world.

- Shinji Imaoka

PRODUCER'S STATEMENT

A FRANCO/JAPANESE PRODUCTION

Since 2017, Miyu has established a sustained collaboration with Japan, notably through a partnership with the company New Deer and its founder, Nobuaki Doi. The aim was to create a bridge between the two countries to encourage the production of films by Japanese independent filmmakers. Despite their international recognition, they would not have been able to make their new films without a co-production with France. Indeed, after making one or two short films, in the absence of support for creative work in Japan, independent filmmakers generally move on to directing commissioned works or work as technicians in animation studios, only to return to directing very rarely.

This collaboration has led to the co-production of 7 short films directed by independent filmmakers who are renowned in the field of animation and who have taken part in major international festivals such as Cannes, Berlin and Annecy. These films would never have seen the light of day without co-production with France. This collaboration also made it possible to co- produce the first feature film by the great master of Japanese independent animation, Koji Yamamura, Dozens of Norths, which won awards at Annecy and Ottawa.

While we were considering co-producing a short film by director Yoko Kuno, we were contacted by Shin-Ei Animation, who wanted to talk to us about a feature film project, Ghost Cat Anzu, co- directed by Yoko Kuno herself and Nobuhiro Yamashita, one of the most important live-action filmmakers of the young generation of independent Japanese cinema.

Working with a major Japanese studio is a rare opportunity, given that the Japanese animation industry is mainly focused on the domestic market. The collaboration with Shin-Ei Animation was born out of the difficulty of making films in Japan that do not fully fit into the standards of the Japanese market. Faced with the challenge of financing Ghost Cat Anzu the Shin-ei team decided to look internationally, in order to find a source of funding and influence, but also to draw on different and complementary artistic visions. This demonstrates a desire to open up to the international market in a context of revolution brought about by non-linear broadcasting, but above all, that this type of art house animation cannot be financed solely in Japan, where the market is the rule. The collaboration with Miyu was therefore able to prove that the film could be of interest to the international market, through the involvement of partners such as Diaphana, Charades and Gkids, the largest US distributor of independent animation, including all of Studio Ghibli's films.

From the outset, Shin-Ei Animation gave Miyu a major role in developing the film's script and graphic universe. This mark of confidence is reflected in the art direction, set design and compositing, all carried out by Miyu. To achieve this, Miyu called on Julien de Man, who brought his expertise from productions such as *The Red Turtle*, *Invasion of the Bears in Sicily* and *Blind Willows*, *Sleeping Woman*. Shin-Ei's decision to entrust these responsibilities to Miyu illustrates their desire, as Yoko Kuno points out, to "advance Japanese animation by proposing new approaches".

The Franco-Japanese co-production represents a challenge both artistically and financially, due to the absence of a co-production agreement between the two countries. But it is above all the human and technical collaboration that represents the greatest challenge. Differences in approach to production, management, the software used, as well as the relationship with artistic rendering and feedback from directors, all require constant adaptation.

Despite these challenges, Miyu and Shin-Ei have forged strong human, artistic and technical links over the months. It is hoped that the success of this co-production will pave the way for a lasting collaboration between Japan and France, two great nations of animated cinema, leading to the emergence of new and unique works.

- Emmanuel-Alain Raynal And Pierre Baussaron

ABOUT SHIN-EI ANIMATION

Shin-Ei Animation is a Japanese animation studio owned by TV Asahi Corporation. Founded in Tokyo in 1976, it is the successor to A Production, the previous animation company of its founder, Daikichirō Kusube, who was previously an animator for Toei Animation.

Shin-Ei is known as one of Japan's leading animation studios. Specialising in children's animation, the studio is behind two of the most successful anime television series: Doraemon and Crayon Shin-chan, which have been broadcast on Japanese television since 1979 and 1992 respectively.

The company has also produced a large number of animated films, including those by the young Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, as well as works such as Panda Little Panda.

ABOUT MIYU

Miyu Productions is an audiovisual production company created in 2009 by Emmanuel-Alain Raynal, specializing in animation. Miyu produces short films, features films and series. Since 2015, Emmanuel-Alain Raynal leads the company in collaboration with Pierre Baussaron.

Since it was created, the company has carried out a sharp editorial line on its projects, both in animation and experimental films, focusing primarily on projects with a strong artistic engagement. Miyu Productions is known for its animated short films, many of which have been recognized and awarded. It currently develops a portfolio of approximately twenty short films, including six international coproductions.

Miyu Productions develops and finances several major projects, including the feature film Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman by Pierre Földes, adapted from several Murakami's novels (Miyu Productions, Cinema Defacto, Proton Cinema, Anoriginal Pictures, micro_scope), but also the upcoming feature films of directors Sébastien Laudenbach and Chiara Malta, Max Porter and Ru Kuwahata, Simon Rouby, Félix Dufour Laperrière and Momoko Seto. Miyu Productions is also involved in several major projects currently in development or in production, including the 52 x 13 minute series Claudy, which recently entered development phase with France Télévisions.

Along with the properties it develops, Miyu is involved with several production companies as a work-for-hire studio. Tjhe company worked on Biarritz Surf Gang (Cassidy for Studio+), Les Mystères de Paris (La Curieuse, Amopix for France 3) and La Révolution Française (Nilaya Productions for France 2), Les Damnés de la commune (Cinétévé, 90' for Arte) and Napoléon, la destinée et la mort (Tournez S'il Vous Plaît for Arte). Miyu also produced the first season of Elliott From Earth for Cartoon Network in its studio in Paris.

Since its creation, Miyu has produced all its projects, and mainly in its parisian studio. The development of the activity has led to the creation of three regional studios: one in Valence, within the Cartoucherie, another in Angoulême in 2016 and one in Arles in 2019. It now has a total of around 130 animation workstations on its four studios.

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Yôko Kuno

Born in 1990 in the prefecture of Ibaraki, Yôko Kumo studied at Tama Art University, where she made her graduation film *Airy Me*, which won the First Film Prize at the Japan Media Art Festival (animation section), the Student Campus Genius Prize and the SKIP City International D Cinema Prize, among other awards.

Recognized on the national and international festival circuit for her talent and technical mastery of animation, she has also been creating manga since secondary school. Her debut publication, “The Horn and Love of Yuiko Am agi “(2017), was featured in Monthly Comic Bearn and won second prize for a debut work at the Japan Media Art Festival (manga section). She thus became the first artist to win two First Work prizes in two different categories at the festival.

She worked as rotoscoping animation director for Shunji lwai’s *The Case of Hana and Alice* (2015). After directing the opening film of the puppet show Gara Piko Pu for NHK’s *Oka-san to Issho* in April 2016, she worked as a character designer for the main character Shiriri in the film *Alien Shiriri* from the popular *Crayon Shin-chan* film series. The following year, she signed the opening and closing animation and original sketches for *Crayon Shin-chan: Kung-fu Boys Ramen Scrimmage*. She also created the ending animation and directed several episodes of the series *Houseki no Kuni / Age of Crystals*, (2017).

Her work in rotoscoping has brought her considerable international recognition, to the point where she is now considered one of the key figures in contemporary animation.

Nobuhiro Yamashita

Born in 1976 in Aichi prefecture, Yamashita is a very popular director of live-action films in Japan. He began making independent films at secondary school and entered the film department at Osaka University of Art in 1995, just as critical attention was focusing on this new wave of filmmakers, revealing a wealth of creativity and a new impetus in Japanese cinema. It was there that he met Kôsuke Mukai, a screenwriter with whom he would work throughout his career in the tradition of Japanese cinema.

His first feature film, *Hazy Life* (1999), is a chronicle of youthful idleness in a small provincial town in the Osaka region, and a comedy in minor mode with caustic, deadpan humor, the matrix of his budding career. The film was selected for the Rotterdam International Film Festival and brought him to the attention of the Japanese and international public. Self-produced, it won him the Grand Prize at the Yubari International Fantastic Film Festival in the off-screen section, and was eventually released commercially in its country of origin, a rare occurrence at the time.

In his early days, he was often compared to Aki Kaurismäki or Jim Jarmusch, for his penchant for young drifter characters.

His first 35mm film, *Linda Linda Linda* (2005), about a group of high-school girls, was a popular success that brought him squarely into the realm of commercial cinema. However, he continues to experiment in a number of formats and despite the constraints of the industry, without abandoning the tone and outlook that make him a singular filmmaker. *Tennen-Koke-Cokko* (2007) won the 62nd Mainichi Film Prize, Japan's leading film award.

In recent years, he has directed *My Back Page* (2011) with Hiroshi Tsumabuki and Kenichi Matsuyama, *Kueki-Ressha* (2012), and *Moratorium Tamako* (2013), which was shown at the Busan International Film Festival. He also directed *La La La at Rock Bottom* (2015) with Subaru Shibuya and Fumi Nikaido for which he received the Golden Sun at the 10th Kinotayo Festival. Finally, he directed Joe Odagiri's film *Over the Fence* (2016).

CAST

Mirai Moriyama
Anzu (voice)

Noa Gotô
Karin (voice)

Munetaka Aoki
Tetsuya

Miwako Ichikawa
Yuzuki

Keiichi Suzuki
Oshô

Shôhei Uno
Actor (voice)

Mutsuo Yoshioka
Actor (voice)

Wataru Sawabe
Tanuki

Shingo Mizusawa
Actor

CREW

Directed by Yôko Kuno & Nobuhiro Yamashita

Screenplay by Shinji Imaoka

Adaptation by Takashi Imashiro

Produced by Pierre Baussaron, Keiichi Kondo, Hiroyuki Neigishi, Emmanuel-Alain Raynal, Shunsuke Yanagisawa

Co-Produced by Yukari Nishikawa

Executive Produced by Carole Baraton, Eric Beckman, Yohann Comte, Dave Jesteadt, Pierre Mazars, Rodney Uhler

Composed by Keiichi Suzuki

Cinematography by Masato Makino

Edited by Toshihiko Kojima

Art direction by Julien de Man