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p. 57

Animaelstrom

Princess Mononoke survives cultural translation.

By Patrick Macias

Can anyone say anything bad about Hayao Miyazaki, a person commonly referred to as the "Master of Japanese Animation" and the "Japanese Walt Disney"?

Even before smashing domestic box-office records in Japan with his 1997 film *Mononoke Hime* (Princess Mononoke), Miyazaki was already the god incarnate of anime. Since Disney has taken to distributing his Studio Ghibli titles in the USA (among them *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Kiki's Delivery Service*), the reputation has only grown. After all, Miyazaki did the impossible. He got the mouse to finally acknowledge a foreign master.

American fans, as if seeking to legitimize all those years of watching weird cartoons in another language, have weighed down Miramax's long-awaited English-dubbed release of *Princess Mononoke* with their hopes and dreams. Pokémon has already proved the medium's commercial appeal. Now Miyazaki's "masterpiece," at the exclusion of others, must show what anime is really capable of as art.

Miyazaki could care less about the wishes of his acolytes. As he told the readers of *Animerica* magazine in a recent interview, "Don't sit around watching animation! Study hard so you can do something good for the Earth."

That's Miyazaki and *Mononoke* in a nutshell: preachy, anachronistic, paternal, and not the slightest bit interested in the desires of the individual. *Princess Mononoke* lectures on so many topics it is hard to keep up: mythology, anger management, humanity versus nature, history, and the struggle of Japan's outcast classes, to name only a few. More than anything, it is a tale told by a disappointed ex-Marxist, using ideology to talk about the failure of ideology. Contradiction is, by design, everywhere. But at the same time, Miyazaki won't allow the viewers to make up their own minds.

Unfolding during the 15th century — the critical juncture in Japan when, the film has it, the populace began to seriously meddle with the environment — *Mononoke* seems at first like a simple eco-friendly story. The purity of the land is continually spoiled by angry animal gods, scheming people who just want to prosper during hard times, and the usual suspects — greed and hubris. At the center of the mael-

strom is San, the titular princess, a young girl adopted by a family of wolf gods. The film's U.S. tag line, referring to the male lead Ashitaka, is "The Fate of the World Rests on the Courage of One Warrior," but fittingly, this contradicts Miyazaki's original message. Taking sides matters little. Life and death occur as a result of the great and terrible aspects of nature symbolized by the hunted god of the forest. The inhabitants of the planet — people



Cel mates: Animal gods, schemers, and Lady Eboshi (above, voice-acted by Minnie Driver), among others, populate Hayao Miyazaki's incredibly complex world.

and beasts alike — can't even learn to live in harmony with nature, or with one another. Everything is sublimated by the totality of the life force.

Miyazaki seduces with the magnificence of his art. A worker in the industry for more than 35 years, he personally oversaw some 80,000 of *Mononoke*'s 140,000 animation cels. His talent, experience, and highly skilled production staff make *Mononoke* a world-class film, not just a puffed-up cartoon. Like the traditional works of art that inspired it, Miyazaki's re-created world is simple-looking while actually being incredibly detailed and complex.

The American version commits no serious acts of betrayal. Although the voice acting provided by the likes of Billy Bob Thornton, Gillian Anderson, and Jada Pinkett can be somewhat uneven (Claire Danes, as San, has no range, while others see "cartoon" and exaggerate accordingly), *Mononoke* comes across as the best adaptation of an anime film ever to arrive here.

It is easy to get caught up in the epic sweep and flow of the runaway narrative, even as the story slows down periodically to accommodate the busy agenda. Many will cry "masterpiece" on principle alone. They have to. But by sacrificing individuality to a gorgeously rendered landscape, the control-freaked *Princess Mononoke* betrays its own humanity. ♦

'Princess Mononoke' opens Fri/5 at Bay Area theaters. See Movie Clock, page 118, for show times.