

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: Spirited Away

“Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi”
 Japan, 2001. Rated PG. 125 min
 Voices (English Version): Daveigh Chase, Jason Marsden, Suzanne Pleshette; Writer: Hayao Miyazaki; Music: Jo Hisaishi, Yumi Kimura; Producer: Toshio Suzuki, Donald W. Ernst (English Version); Director: Hayao Miyazaki

Veteran Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki abruptly announced his retirement after his last feature, *Princess Mononoke* (1997) broke box office records in his native country. Fortunately, the retirement was short-lived. In 2001, he released *SPIRITED AWAY*. This imaginative, vibrantly designed film tells the extraordinary tale of

Chihiro, a ten year-old girl who is traveling with her parents by car to a new home. Along the way, her father takes a wrong turn. The family exits the car, walks through a tunnel, and ends up at what looks like an abandoned amusement park. They are actually in the Land of the Spirits. The parents' greedy behavior soon turns them into pigs, and to save them, Chihiro must take a job at a sort of resort for the Spirits. In doing so, she faces many obstacles, and ends up giving her name to Yubaba, the evil witch/bird who runs the resort. Yubaba gives Chihiro a new name, Sen, which is referred to in the film's original Japanese title, *SEN TO CHIHIRO NO KAMIKAKUSHI* (The Spiriting Away of Sen and Chihiro).

One can trace *SPIRITED AWAY'S* theme of a girl lost in a magical world, desperately trying to find her way home, all the way back to such classics as *The Wizard of Oz*

and *Alice In Wonderland*. However, the film's surrealist touches and delightfully peculiar inventions also bring to mind *Yellow Submarine*. While in the Land of the Spirits, Chihiro meets an assortment of odd, magical characters, including Kamaji, an arachnid-limbed boiler man; No Face, a tricky, kabuki-masked ghost; and Haku, a boy who offers to help Chihiro but also seems to have a strange double life within the resort. There are also eccentric, enchanting figures like the minuscule coal-carrying soot creatures, three bouncing disembodied heads, the unforgettable, nearly uncontrollable Stink Spirit, and a very, very big baby.



Miyazaki was born in Tokyo in 1941, and started his career as an animator at the studio Toei Douga at the age of 22. He went on to create many animated television shows and eight features, including *Nausicaa Of The Valley Of The Wind*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, and *Kiki's Delivery Service*. Although he has not cited Disney as an influence on his work (he names Ozu, Bresson, and De Sica instead), his Studio Ghibli currently has a deal with Disney Studios to have his work distributed in the U.S. John Lasseter of Pixar supervised the English dubbing of the film, painstakingly

matching the actor's English language dialogue with the mouth movements of the characters. The result is flawless, and uses the voices of Daveigh Chase (Chihiro; she also recently voiced Lilo in *Lilo And Stitch*), David Ogden Stiers (Kamaji), Michael Chiklis (Chihiro's father), Jason Marsden (Haku), and, most memorably, a wonderfully sinister Suzanne Pleshette as both Yubaba and her identical twin sister Zeniba.

Miyazaki has said that a friend's lethargic 10 year-old daughter inspired the film. "That's who I wrote it for," he says. "Actually, there were five girls, and two became a model for Chihiro. Every time I asked myself, 'Would one of those girls do this? Is it too much for them?'"

SPIRITED AWAY won the prestigious Golden Bear at this year's Berlin International Film Festival (shared with *Bloody Sunday*). Other honors include Best Picture at the Japanese Academy

Awards, Best Asian Film at the Hong Kong Film Awards, and Best Narrative Feature at the 45th San Francisco International Film Festival. Miyazaki has said, "My heart is so full when I make a film. I want to reach out and touch Japanese children in my immediate vicinity. That it's making its way out of our island nation and around the world is a bonus." In July 2001, Miyazaki announced that *SPIRITED AWAY* would be his last film, but the retirement was once again short-lived. He is preparing a new film due for release in Japan in summer 2004.

- Chris Kriofske