



How 'Suzume' Reflects the Japanese Culture of Self-Sacrifice and Conformity

Actor Nichole Sakura, who voices the film's titular character, shares how summers spent as a kid in Japan provided unique insight into her role, and helping write the English dub, on Makoto Shinkai's latest film, born of his survivor's guilt having lived through the devastating Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011.

By **Victoria Davis** | Tuesday, April 25, 2023 at 3:01pm

In **2D, CG, Films, People, Voice Acting** | **ANIMATIONWorld** | Geographic Region: **North America**



Makoto Shinkai's 'Suzume,' now playing in theaters. All images © Suzume Film Partners.

12 years ago—after producing five short films, three features, and receiving critical acclaim for his work—animator, filmmaker, author, and manga artist Makoto Shinkai faced a crisis of purpose after the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011. It was the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in Japan, and the fourth most powerful earthquake in the world. More than a hundred evacuation sites were washed away and the snowfall, which accompanied the tsunami and the freezing temperature, hindered rescue. The official figures released in 2021 reported 19,759 deaths, 6,242 injured, and 2,553 people missing.

“What I felt when that big earthquake happened was, of course, concern about whether all the people of the Tohoku region were okay, but also relief at the fact that we weren’t directly harmed by it,” says Shinkai, a resident of Tokyo at the time. “All those feelings came together to leave me with an intense feeling of guilt. Even when Japan was going through so much, was it really right for me to just carry on producing animation for entertainment purposes?”

He continues, “I wanted to take on some sort of role. And the work I’m good at is creating animated films... I think, in modern Japan, it’s impossible to separate yourself from disasters. Disasters are happening right below our feet all the time. We Japanese people live on land that could start to shake at any moment. That’s why I wanted to write a story that could only be told here, and I spent these past 10 years writing in the form of an animated film for entertainment.”



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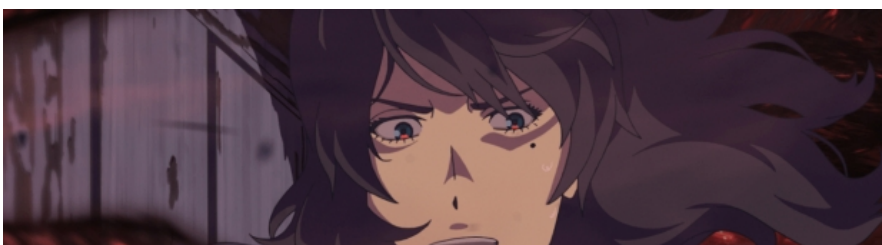
Suzume, now showing in U.S. theaters, is produced by CoMix Wave Films, and distributed by Toho. It's Shinkai's seventh feature, following his award-winning triumphs *Your Name* and *Weathering With You*, and follows a 16-year-old girl named Suzume who meets a traveler named Souta. The young man bears the responsibility of being a "Closer," and journeys around Japan closing doors in abandoned locations before the doors can release a natural disaster, such as an earthquake.



"One of the cool things our English dub director, Bill Millsap, tipped me off about was that the monster-like element of earthquakes in this movie ties back to this piece of Japanese folklore that I hadn't heard about before," says Nichole Sakura, who voices for Suzume in the film's English dub. "There's a story about a giant catfish that lives under the earth and every time it waves its tail, an earthquake happens in Japan, and someone has to stop the earthquake by putting a stone into the catfish to stop it. I love when storytellers take an element of the past or traditional folk tale and modernize it."

When Suzume accidentally removes, and thus releases, a mischievous keystone in the ruins of her town, just outside one of the doors Souta had yet to close, the keystone takes the form of a cat and places a curse on Souta that turns him into one of Suzume's childhood chairs. Suzume and Souta then embark on a quest to catch the keystone while closing doors all over the island nation of Japan in order to reverse the cat's curse and prevent any further disaster. And, each time the pair visits another deserted and abandoned location, they go through the process of prayer and mourning, spending time with the thoughts and feelings of the people who used to be there.

"The most powerful characteristic of entertainment is its power to inspire empathy in those who partake in it," says Shinkai. "In entertainment, no matter how far removed the world you depict is from yourself, people will grow to love the characters in it, and they can enjoy the story as if they were characters in it themselves."



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For actor Sakura—known for her roles in *Shameless*, *Superstore*, *Robot Chicken*, and *Star Wars: Visions*—Shinkai offered a truly unique and personal experience, with her getting to see the film as a Japanese-American fan, experience the emotions of people she's never met but with whom she shares a common culture and history, as well as getting to voice Suzume and truly walk in the shoes of her character.

"I had gotten to see the movie first in the original, Japanese version, and I was bawling," shares Sakura. "My big hope is that the audience would feel the same impact that I did when I watched the Japanese version. I focused on how personal the relationships felt and the sense of loss that Suzume experienced and the relationship with her aunt that she's navigating."

In the movie, it's explained that Suzume lost her mother in the Great East Japan Earthquake and that Suzume was thereafter raised by her aunt. While most of the film shows Suzume's aunt as being a typically over-protective and lovingly concerned guardian, there's a point in the story where the two have a heated argument over the heavy-laden effect that losing Suzume's mother had on each of their lives and how, in truth, it's not what either of them would have wished for.

"My mom is from Japan, so I grew up going to Japan as a kid every summer, and I'm pretty fluent in the language," explains Sakura. "Like with any language, you can't always translate it exactly. There are so many phrases and little nuances that only native speakers can really grasp. And that's a huge challenge in translating a film, trying to get as many of the nuances in there as possible that inform the character in the story."



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She continues, "One of the most central relationships that Suzume has is with her aunt, and they hash it out at one point, their feelings about the fact that Suzume's aunt raised her, and the sacrifices that had to be made. I felt lucky that I understood the original language because it did really help inform my performance."

While many reviews of the film have focused on Suzume's relationship with Souta, Sakura felt most compelled by the aunt-niece relationship in Shinkai's story, which she says is highly reflective of a key part of Japanese culture and one of the traits of the film that makes *Suzume* a story that, as Shinkai wished, "could only be told in Japan."

"That relationship was especially interesting and beautiful to me because some of the stuff they talk about, this sense of sacrifice out of honor or respect or love over finding your own pleasure, or chasing after your own desires, is integral in Japanese culture," says Sakura. "That was a huge reason why my mom came to the U.S., actually. The culture over there, especially for her generation, always had this big emphasis on doing what's expected of you from society and following these very strict rules. It can be beautiful, but also feel constraining for people like my mom who wanted to feel a greater sense of freedom."

In addition to channeling her mother's real-life quest for freedom within Suzume, who goes on her own journey of freedom and self-discovery, Sakura also had a hand in the script writing for the film's English dub.

"Bill didn't speak Japanese, so a lot of times I would be like, 'I think that this would be a closer translation' and would pitch a line and it would end up working," says Sakura. "I think we got a really truthful translation, and I can say that I'm really proud of that."

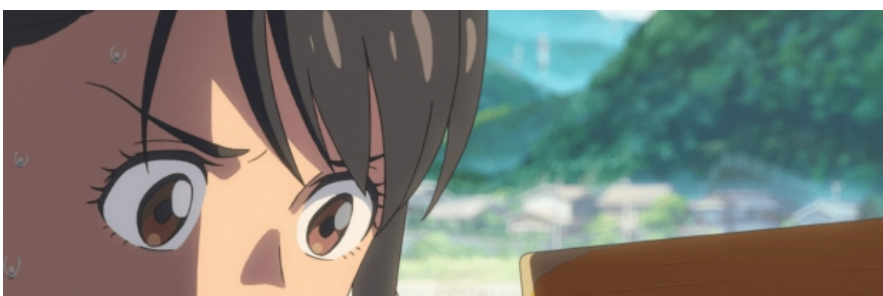


Especially in a film so heavily rooted in Japan, from natural disasters and social obligations, down to even the bonds built around food.

"Food is such a big part of Asian culture," notes Sakura. "It's like such an important place of bonding and showing care. In Japan, people don't always say 'I love you' or use verbal ways of expressing themselves. But food is a huge part of showing your care and your love. And it's wild that you can see that in this movie. There are moments where the characters share meals, and the food just looks so good and that it's made with such care. I love all the cultural elements that were masterfully put into this story."

The "huge soup" of a film, as Sakura refers to it, is two hours of adventure, love, folklore lessons, disaster awareness, cultural traditions, family reconciliations, time traveling, world hoping, and more.

"Suzume's experienced all this loss and then meets Souta, who is really good looking, even for a cartoon, and she falls in love with this guy, and that love inspires her to go on this journey and do all these really brave things," says Sakura. "She acknowledges the past and decides to be okay with it. It doesn't have to be fixed. Life goes on, you move on, and continue growing and forming new relationships, meaningful relationships, and finding love in different forms."





It's a powerful story, but a lot to take in, and worth watching twice, not only according to Sakura, but Shinkai as well.

"I remember he told us at the beginning of the film, 'It's really long. Just make yourself comfortable,' and I think that's good advice," says the actor. "Make sure you're really experiencing it and letting the film wash over you. And the visuals are incredible to see on a big theater screen, so I highly recommend that."



Victoria Davis is a full-time, freelance journalist and part-time Otaku with an affinity for all things anime. She's reported on numerous stories from activist news to entertainment. Find more about her work at victoriadavisdepiction.com.

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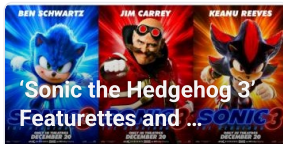


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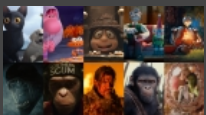
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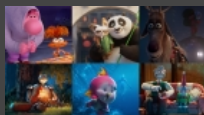
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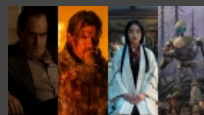
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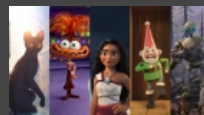
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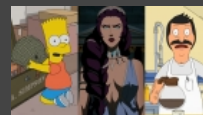
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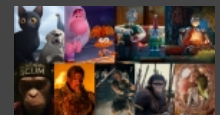
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