

# 'Spirited Away,' other anime succeed where Hollywood fails

## Movie review

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Pulse Reporter

Presently, animated films are more prolific and profitable than ever. Recent releases such as "Monsters, Inc.," "Atlantis: The Lost Empire" and "Shrek" have become veritable cash cows for their respective movie studios, thanks to extensive theatrical and video marketing campaigns and their kid-tailored appeal.

But animated films with ideas to match one-for-one the pretty, flickering candy-colored images are still rare. Japanese filmmakers have frequently provided where the vacuous Hollywood system has failed — look no farther than "Ghost in the Shell," "Akira," or even "Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within" as examples.

"Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi" or "Spirited Away," is the latest treasure in this tradition of anime. The film has become insanely popular in Japan and now stands as the highest grossing film in the country's box office history.

Hayao Miyazaki, the film's creator

(director and writer), was also responsible for "Princess Mononoke" (or "Mononoke Hime"), which hit U.S. theaters three years ago.

"Spirited Away" is different from "Princess Mononoke," but it maintains spiritual connections to the film, circling around familiar viewpoints regarding nature and superficiality. It also keeps a familiar animation aesthetic, although the imagery and look of characters from "Spirited Away" have a sensibility that's slightly psychedelic.

Also like "Princess Mononoke," the film's dialogue has been dubbed by an American cast for its U.S. release. John Lasseter, the director of "A Bug's Life" and both "Toy Story" films, supervised this effort in an attempt to match the English spoken words with the animated mouth movements of the characters accurately.

The beginning of the film is set in modern-day Japan, complete with cars, highways and tall buildings. Chihiro, a young girl, rides in the backseat of her parents' upscale vehicle. The three are in the process of moving into a new home. Yet, by the father literally taking a wrong turn, the fami-

ly ends up being drawn into a surreal, ethereal world run by spirits, but also inhabited by human beings.

Eventually, the parents' own indulgence leads them to being turned into pigs, leaving the heroine in this place on her own. If this sounds too much like a set-up, it's executed strangely enough to work.

The only character who might be considered a villain is Yubaba, a woman who runs a bathhouse and keeps her workers by "taking" their names — so they can't remember who they are.

Much of the film is set inside the bathhouse. A great scene involves a character called "No-Face," who is accidentally let into the bathhouse by Sen (Chihiro, who is forced to surrender her name in order to survive) and eventually develops an infatuation for her. No-Face starts giving gold to everyone in his path, and before long, the entire bathhouse is at his whim. As he is unable to find Sen, his rage grows; he eventually starts eating people. Later, Sen is able to lead him out of the bathhouse, but instead of casting him off or running away, she asks No-Face



Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki's "Spirited Away" is playing at Eugene's Bijou Art Cinemas. Courtesy photo

to become a companion on a journey she's about to undertake.

This exchange might come across as generic or false, but this is one of the strengths of "Spirited Away": Even its most saccharin, bittersweet moments are able to remain genuine. Attribute this to the strengths of the characters and plot, which contains no thick or pronounced lines. Things don't happen the way they would typically be expected to. There are no "good guys" and no "bad guys."

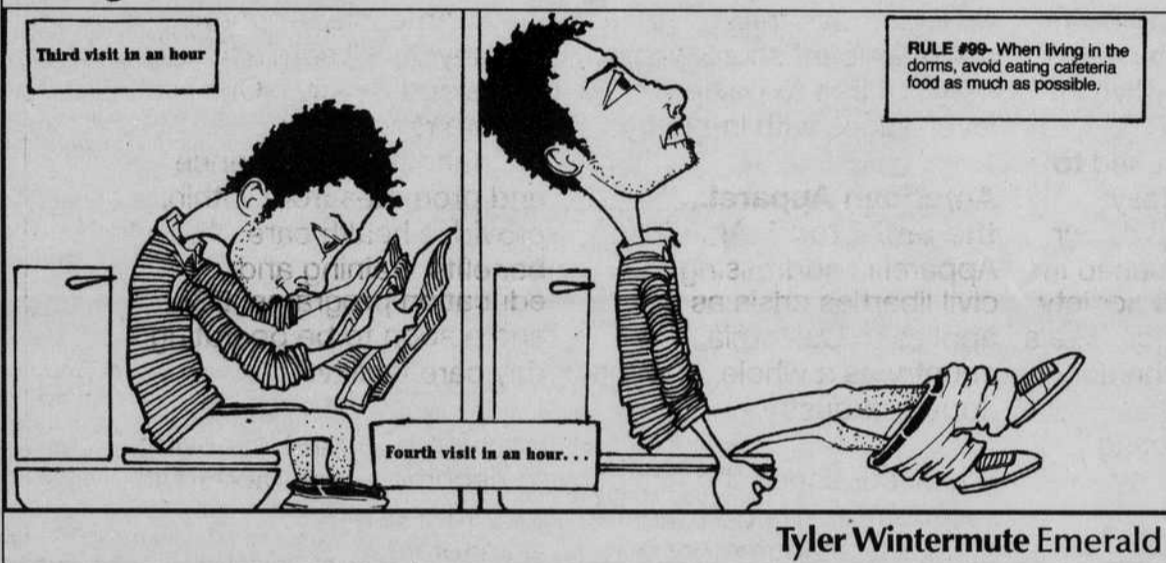
The spiritual world that Chihiro inhabits maintains strong thematic

connections to the "real" world where the narrative begins. While there's more than meets the eye in both places, even in the spirit world, the characters and events maintain a connection to this reality. When Chihiro, and viewers finally return to this world, both are left changed. Nothing more can be asked for in a film, and this is what makes "Spirited Away" great.

The film is now playing at Bijou Art Cinemas.

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