

Tokyo festival opens with gruelling boxing *Underdog* film

By Yuri Kageyama
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Masaharu Take's films have always focused on painful stories about Japan's "underclass," people who are often overlooked in a nation stereotyped as monolithically well-to-do.

The heroes of his latest work, *Underdog*, couldn't be more beaten down, stoically hardworking, yet hopelessly underclass: They are boxers.

"Most of them will lose. Most of them will never become champions," said Take, who is also directing the Netflix hit *The Naked Director*.

"I feel an adoration for those boxers, their strength, the courage that they have, that I don't have, and that's what I've been imagining and thinking about."

Take, who loved Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* and was profoundly influenced by *Raging Bull*, directed by Martin Scorsese, scored success six years ago with *100 Yen Love*, which also had boxing as a motif. It starred a clumsy introverted woman who finds purpose and pride, as well as physical fitness, through boxing.

"When we thought about what was the most brutal sport we could put the character through, we came up with boxing," he told The Associated Press recently.

Take (pronounced TUH-kay) returns to the boxing theme with a vengeance with *Underdog*, a gruelling work telling not just one but three stories of boxers over nearly five hours.

Dancer Mirai Morimoto gives an all-out performance as the washed out formerly No. 1 ranked Akira, gaining muscle as well as fighter moves for the role. A comedian, played by Ryo Katsuji, gets serious for the first time in life when a TV producer's idea of entertainment is to pit him against a real boxer. Takumi Kitamura portrays a reformed delinquent whose dream is to fight Akira.

Underdog premiered as the opener for the Tokyo International Film Festival, which started over the weekend and runs through November 9.

The three protagonists' gut-wrenching tales of struggle and emotional loss drive the plot, and the fights in the ring work like cathartic celebrations of Take's filmmaking. The men are all born losers, despite their championship dreams. But the film shows defeat sometimes can be glorious.

The festival's screenings are socially distanced among other coronavirus



measures, and a scaled-down red-carpet gala was streamed online.

The festival also features the Cannes Jury Prize-winning director, Koji Fukada, screening several of his films, including his latest, *The Real Thing*, his first adaptation of a comic book, and an official selection at Cannes.

Fukada says independent Japanese filmmakers have a hard time, even those collecting accolades abroad. Japanese

government support for films is minimal, he said, a fraction of the funding in South Korea or France. Theaters in Japan are controlled by major studios looking for blockbusters. In contrast, South Korea and France pool a portion of ticket sales to support independent filmmaking.

"Japan has no systemic way to support the film industry," Fukada told reporters recently at the Foreign Correspondents' Club in Tokyo.

HARD-HITTING FILM. This undated combination image of photos provided by 2020 Underdog Film Partners shows (L-R) Takumi Kitamura, Mirai Moriyama, and Ryo Katsuji in the movie sets of *Underdog*, directed by Masaharu Take. Take's films have always focused on painful stories about Japan's "underclass," people who are often overlooked in a nation stereotyped as monolithically well-to-do. (2020 Underdog Film Partners via AP)

Take agrees that making films in Japan is so difficult he fears the best actors and crew will flee to work abroad. He found the environment for working for Netflix, in contrast, wonderful.

Take acknowledged *The Naked Director*, whose hero makes pornography films, has been slammed as misogynist but he defended the work as "a challenge" to raise questions.

"It's a challenge to depict how women have been oppressed. We want to show more respect for the women," said Take.

He stressed the main character had respect for the actresses, and the second season, which he is working on now, will show "how despicable and ignorant all the men were."

"This is such a worthwhile, and very difficult, challenge. We may get criticized, but films should not avoid this challenge. And they can't be made otherwise," Take said.

K-pop band TWICE reveals daring side on album

By Juwon Park
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — TWICE, a popular K-pop group known for its catchy lyrics and colorful aesthetics, has released its second full album, a collection that invites listeners into the band's more daring side.

Eyes Wide Open, released last month, features 13 songs, including the lead single "I Can't Stop Me."

The all-female group, which debuted in 2015 and has achieved success in both Japan and South Korea, sat down with The Associated Press ahead of the release to talk about the project.

Nayeon, one of the band's nine members, said that "I Can't Stop Me" has a "retro" sound, with lyrics about "not being able to control ourselves crossing the line."

The track sees TWICE explore the boundaries between good and bad, revealing a more daring side of the band — a departure from its happy-go-lucky style.

When asked to discuss boundaries they wouldn't cross in their personal lives, the group — which has Japanese, South



Korean, and Taiwanese members, all in their early 20s — didn't elaborate.

"This is a difficult question!" Jihyo said with a cheeky smile.

K-pop bands like TWICE are celebrated for their tightly synchronized dance moves and spotless aesthetics, often enduring years of training on the way to stardom. The demand for perfection never ends — leaving no room for mistakes, either onstage or off.

Group member Sana said balancing a hectic schedule with onstage perfection

DARING DIRECTION. South Korean girl group TWICE poses for a photo in Seoul, South Korea. The popular K-pop group known for its catchy lyrics and colorful aesthetics, has released its second full album, a collection that invites listeners into the band's more daring side. (Kim Oi Mil, JYP Entertainment via AP)

wasn't easy when TWICE first started.

"We had so many venues we needed to perform at, but we had very limited time to prepare," she said. "There were lots of moments when we'd practice for three hours twice a day and get on stage right away. So preparing and having to give perfect performances to so many people in such a rushed time weighed on us."

"We could've done better and wanted to do better," she added. "It was difficult to go through moments of not having control."

But with half a decade of experience under their belt, the band is now allowed more breathing room.

"We don't try too hard to be perfect," said Tzuyu, the band's Taiwanese singer. "I think I try to enjoy the moment instead of being so harsh on myself."

As K-pop goes global thanks to bands like BTS and Blackpink, TWICE has its eyes on the U.S. market, planning to release English-language songs in the near future.

Holiday safety during COVID-19

During the holiday season, it's important to remember to follow the general safety guidance that will keep you and your loved ones healthy:

- Stay home when you are sick and avoid others
- Wear a face covering around at-risk family members and anyone who is not part of your household
- Wash or sanitize your hands frequently
- Physically distance from at-risk family members and anyone who is not part of your household



WEAR A MASK TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS

