

The anime hit *Suzume* and Shinkai's cinema of cataclysm

By Jake Coyle
AP Film Writer

NEW YORK — Makoto Shinkai was never the same filmmaker after the 2011 earthquake struck Japan.

When the tsunami and quake ravaged the Tohoku region of northern Japan and prompted a nuclear meltdown, Shinkai, a now 50-year-old director and animator of some of the most popular anime features in the world, could feel his sense of storytelling crumbling.

"The shock to me was that the daily life that we had become accustomed to in Japan can suddenly be severed without any warning whatsoever," says Shinkai. "I had this odd, foreboding feeling that that could happen again and again. I began to think about how I wanted to tell stories within this new reality."

The three blockbusters that have followed by Shinkai — *Your Name*, *Weathering With You*, and the new release *Suzume* — have each tethered hugely emotional tales to ecological disaster. In *Your Name*, a meteor threatens to demolish a village, an event that dovetails with a body-switching romance. In *Weathering With You*, a runaway teenage boy befriends a Tokyo girl who can control the weather, spawning fluctuations that mirror climate change.

"With these three films, I didn't set out to make a disaster movie. I wanted to tell a love story, a romance, a coming-of-age of an adolescent girl," Shinkai said on a recent trip to New York, speaking through an interpreter. "As I continued to make the plot, this idea of disaster kept creeping in. Suddenly, I felt surrounded in my daily life by disaster. It's like a door that keeps opening."

Shinkai has emerged as one of cinema's most imaginative filmmakers of contemporary cataclysm. His movies aren't just about surviving apocalypse, though, but living with its omnipresent threat. And it's made him one of the biggest box-office draws in movies.

After it was released in 2016, *Your Name* became the then-best-selling anime of all time, dethroning Hayao Miyazaki's beloved *Spirited Away* with nearly \$400 million in ticket sales. *Weathering With You* made nearly \$200 million. Before opening in North America, *Suzume* has



already crossed \$200 million, including \$100 million in Japan and nearly that in China. It's easily the biggest international release of the year so far in China, more than doubling the sales of *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantummania*.

Much of that success is owed to Shinkai's earnest grappling with today's ecological upheaval in sprawling epics that are filtered through everyday life. National trauma mixes with supernatural fantasy. While Japan has been home to many extreme geological events, it's a tension that most in the world can increasingly connect with.

"It can be anything: earthquakes, climate change, the pandemic. Russia and Ukraine, for an example," says Shinkai. "This idea that our daily life will continue to maintain the status quo should be set

aside and challenged."

Shinkai, who writes and directs his films, has become convinced that young people shouldn't be pandered to with stories where the natural world is heroically returned to balance, calling such approaches "egotistic and irresponsible." Instead, his disasters take on metaphorical meaning for young protagonists who learn to persist, and find joy, in a world of perpetual danger, shadowed by loss.

His latest, which was the first anime in competition at the Berlin Film Festival in two decades, is a road movie where the 17-year-old Suzume (voiced by Nanoka Hara) travels from the southwestern island of Kyushu with that mysterious young man, Souta (Hokuto Matsumura), who happens to get transformed into a

BLOCKBUSTER ANIME. This image released by Sony Pictures Entertainment shows Suzume (top photo), voiced in Japanese by Nanoka Hara and dubbed in English by Nichole Sakura, in a scene from the animated film *Suzume*, by filmmaker Makoto Shinkai (bottom photo). (Photo/Jordan Strauss/Invision/AP)

three-legged chair while closing a portal.

As a wooden sidekick, Souta recalls a Miyazaki side character like the hopping scarecrow of *Howl's Moving Castle*. But Shinkai, who's often been cited as among the heirs to Miyazaki, says his film is no homage. But he grants Miyazaki's influence is so pervasive in Japanese society that it seeps into everything. He imagines *Suzume*, herself, grew up on his films.

Shinkai liked the symbolism of a chair, something we use every day. His father made him one as a child. While promoting *Suzume*, Shinkai has travelled with a chair just like the one in the movie, packing it in a suitcase, bringing it with him on stage, and occasionally taking pictures of it at places like Times Square or the Museum of Natural History.

"I've picked very daily items — a door, a chair — that are perhaps relatable to a wide range of audiences," he says. "This symbolism of the door, I think people are able to translate to their own story. We start thinking about: How do we maintain our daily routine?"

Shinkai is known for photorealistic panoramas of glittering splendor. As much as doorways make up the iconography of *Suzume*, the most indelible image is one he uses at the beginning and end of the film. *Suzume* rides her bike on a steep hill with a sparkling ocean set behind her. The waters below, which to her could signify the tsunami that left her an orphan, are at once gorgeous and perilous.

"In a weird way, I feel that with *Your Name* and *Weathering With You* and *Suzume* that I'm creating this sort of folklore or mythology," Shinkai says. "In mythology or these ancient legends, what they're doing is taking real-life events and transforming it into a story that can [be] relayed to others."

Whether Shinkai will continue on this quest in his next film he doesn't know. It's a blank slate, he says. But he doesn't close the door.

"As I continue to make more stories," he says, smiling, "that door might start creaking open again."

DID YOU KNOW?

The expiration date of many at-home COVID-19 tests has been extended. Check out the FDA at-home COVID-19 test page to see if your brand has updated its shelf life.

Oregon Health

ASTHMA IS ON THE RISE.

Help us find a cure.
1-800-LUNG-USA

Managing diabetes makes a huge difference.

It's not always easy to manage diabetes, but I keep trying by taking it one day at a time.

For more information, please call 1-800-860-8747 or visit www.ndep.nih.gov.

NATIONAL DIABETES EDUCATION PROGRAM

A joint program of the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Black Pearl Acupuncture

Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine are great for:

- Acute/Chronic Pain (i.e. neck, back, sciatica & shoulder)
- Treating & Preventing the flu and colds
- Stress Relief
- Headaches/Migraines

www.blackpearlacupuncture.com

Sita Symonette
Licensed Acupuncturist
seasymonettea@gmail.com

Call to schedule an appointment: (503) 308-9363
505 N.W. Ninth Ave., Portland, OR 97209

Update your Oregon My Electronic Vaccine Card before May 11.

To update your card, visit myelectronicvaccinecard.oregon.gov

Enter your personal information and follow the prompts using your phone or computer.

You do not need to know the dates you received your COVID-19 shots; OHA has that information and will update the card automatically during this process.

If your card doesn't display all of the doses you've received, that's OK. It will always show your most recent doses.

The electronic vaccine card is voluntary.

Visit myelectronicvaccinecard.oregon.gov

Advertise your business, service, or recruitment advertisement in The Asian Reporter!

For information, please contact our Advertising Dept. at (503) 283-4440.