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Review of Tony Takitani

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Tony Takitani
(Strand Home Video, 1.10.2006)

Haruki Murakami is one of the world's greatest novelists. The author of *A Wild Sheep Chase*, *Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, and *Kafka on the Shore* writes highly literary fiction with nonlinear narratives and offbeat humor. Though Murakami has been publishing fiction since 1979, none of his works has been made into a film until now.

The title character of *Tony Takitani*, released in Japan in 2004 and based upon a story published in *The New Yorker* in 2002, is first seen as a boy (Shinohara Takahumi) born shortly after the end of World War II. Tony's mother dies three days after his birth, and his father (Issei Ogata), a jazz musician, ignores him. Tony's sense of lonely isolation is only increased by his father's perverse decision to give him an American first name.

The adult Tony (also played by Ogata) works as an illustrator, an occupation fitting to his solitary personality. Because he has trouble relating to people, Tony draws only mechanical objects. Then out of nowhere he falls for the much younger Eiko (Rie Miyazawa) and marries her. While Tony works, Eiko shops. They have to convert a room in their apartment into a closet to hold all of Eiko's clothes.

When the timid Tony finally suggests that perhaps his wife doesn't need all this apparel, an unexpected event occurs. Murakami's works are full of references to American fiction, popular music, and films. He has translated *The Catcher in the Rye* into Japanese and has said that *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, his best-known novel, was inspired by David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. The inspiration for what happens in the final third of *Tony Takitani* is Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, minus the suspense. Director Jun Ichikawa shots the exteriors to resemble the hilly landscape of Hitchcock's San Francisco.

Not much happens in *Tony Takitani*, but it crams considerable insight about loneliness and romantic longing into its 75 minutes. Wong Kar Wai is said to be a fan of Murakami, and *Tony Takitani* resembles a miniature version of *In the Mood for Love* or the second half of *Chungking Express*.

Like Wong, Ichikawa loves to move the camera. He shows the progression of Tony's career as an illustrator by gliding the camera slowly from left to right as the years pass, as if Tony is moving from room to room as he ages. Ichikawa, who also wrote the screenplay, calls attention to his technique by having his characters finish sentences begun by his narrator (Hidetoshi Nishijima).

Ogata, one of the stars of Edward Yang's acclaimed *Yi Yi*, has the sort of face for which the term *hangdog* was invented. His Moe Howard haircut only adds to Tony's comic forlornness. Ogata offers a masterful example of minimalist acting.

He and Ichikawa provide a bit of emotional distance that keeps the film from becoming unbearably melancholy.

Ichikawa has directed fifteen other films, none available on DVD in the U.S., and is clearly a talented stylist. As *The New York Times* recently observed, American audiences and film distributors are increasingly reluctant to embrace foreign films. *Tony Takitani* was shown at the 2004 Vancouver Film Festival and the 2005 Sundance Film Festival and appeared briefly in a handful of cities last summer and fall. Few have heard of it, but thanks to DVD, anyone can appreciate its odd, small pleasures.

The only extras are the theatrical trailer and previews of other Strand offerings. Unfortunately, the film has the smallest subtitles I've ever seen. Perhaps Strand wants us to move our chairs closer to have a more intimate experience.--Michael Adams