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OBON

*animated documentary by
André Hörmann and SAMO*



SYNOPSIS

In a short-animated documentary, Akiko Takakura, one of the last remaining survivors of the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima, tells her life story. In this visually and emotional stunning story, she describes how, amidst the terror and nightmares, she found a rare moment of closeness with her father.



PROTAGONIST

Akiko Takakura is one of only 10 people within a radius of 500 meters from ground zero to have survived the atomic bomb blast. While her colleague and friend Satomi Usami died from burns and a broken back, Ms. Takakura survived the catastrophe by sheer luck. She remembers extraordinary details and is able to bring them to life in her stories. The scenes described in the script are based solely on her experiences. Today, Ms. Takakura is 92 years old and lives in Hiroshima with her family where she is under their care.





HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There are not many survivors alive today who saw the bright lights of the atomic bomb “Little Boy” with their own eyes. They are old now. And once they die, only the black spots on the city’s granite steps will remain. These spots are the indication of where people were sitting at the time when the bomb detonated. The blazing heat literally burned their shadows into the pavement and these are the mark that remain to this day. Hiroshima was forever changed from the moment that the atomic bomb detonated. The city was completely destroyed. The heartbeat of the city revolves around the “Little Boy”. There is a Peace Museum, Peace Memorial Park, the famous Atomic Dome on top of the ruins that used to be the chamber of commerce and countless other memorial sites. But only the “Hibakushas”, as the atomic bomb survivors are called, know what the catastrophe really felt like. “Little Boy’s” curse has haunted them their entire lives. It pulled families apart, destroyed their bodies and had them survive in a society that no longer wanted them. Once they die, their individual memories and the raw emotions of this event will die with them.

OBON CELEBRATION

Ms. Takakura celebrates Obon, one of the most important Buddhist holidays. During Obon, families remember loved ones who have passed away. According to the belief, the deceased's spirits return home each year at the time of Obon. In preparation for the spirits' arrivals people clean their houses and hang up lanterns in order to help the spirits find their way home. On the holiday itself, food and beverages are sacrificed at the home altar, family graves are cleaned and decorated with flowers. In the evening, dance rituals to fast paced Bon-Odoru music are performed in temple squares. Lastly, the believers say goodbye to the spirits by letting the lanterns drift down a river or out into the sea. The lanterns are supposed to guide the spirits back to their world. In Hiroshima, this day has a special meaning. The commemoration is extended to the victims of the atomic bomb blast on August 6th, 1945.





PRESS STATEMENTS

Hörmann and Samo artistically combine the almost drastic images animated in great detail with Takakura's words, which describe the events with gentle urgency. Hörmann and Samo's OBON successfully merge different worlds. Daughter and father, peace and war, tradition and modernity. All this united in a distinct, fascinating art form.

FBW Filmbewertungsstelle

A story about the vibrant memory of the victims of atomic bombs dropped on Japan. The short film is also a nostalgic and poetic evocation of the relationship between a young survivor and her father throughout her life. A little story inside the History, shining like a small light in the middle of the night.

Jury-Statement International Huesca Filmfestival

With the images as beautiful as traditional woodcuts, in a very contemporary way, an old woman recollects her youth and the difficult relationship with her father, for whose love she had to wait for a very long time.

Jury-Statement Krakow International Filmfestival



ANDRÉ HÖRMANN /// DIRECTOR'S NOTE



The nuclear threat is just as relevant today as it was during the cold war. China, the USA, North Korea, India, Pakistan and Israel are all in possession of nuclear weapons. It is a very likely possibility that one of today's many world conflicts may escalate to the use of this deadly form of warfare. To change the future, I wanted to learn from the past. During a three month stay in Hiroshima I was able to do intensive research. I met historians, nuclear scientists and peace researchers and collected material in the archives of the Hiroshima Peace Foundation. Most importantly, I conducted many interviews with survivors of the atomic bomb. The explosion, that catastrophe of civilization, was a moment that changed their lives and the city forever. Each survivor still has the blearing sound in their ears, the putrid smell in their nose and the blinding light in their eyes. Those memories of the detonation are as vivid today as they were the seconds, hours and days following the attack.

The unbelievable horror of this hell like fire, the loss of loved ones and the late repercussions of the atomic contamination are omnipresent in many of the survivors' memories. All of the people that I talked to have important stories to tell but I was most personally moved by the story of Akiko Takakura. I conducted several interviews with her, lasting many hours, during which time she spoke in detail about her lasting memories and feelings during the moments right around the bomb's detonation.

I was touched deeply by Akiko's delicate relationship with her father. At just 19 years of age, in the midst of the catastrophe, she experienced for the very first time what it means to receive fatherly affection. It was a tiny moment of happiness during weeks and months of unspeakable tragedy. To me OBON is all about this very moment.

ANNA SAMO /// DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I did not choose to make OBON. The film tricked me into it, pulled me in step by step until there was no chance of turning back.

I see signposts pointing me toward this project in my own history: a tiny book of Hokusai prints stolen from a library in Moscow 20 years ago; a black handbag with golden rabbits from my honeymoon in Japan; a poster from Hiroshima Animation Festival that I skipped because of my mom's birthday.

Making OBON was not easy. It exhausted me, tore something in me apart, made me grow up in a way I never planned. I had to become vulnerable in order to pass on emotion. While researching the visuals for the film, I pored over a book of pictures made by survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. For me, the most overwhelming images were drawn by people who were not artists. Without craft or artistry to hide behind, the drawings told stories unfiltered, made me hear shaking voices saying: this is what happened to us. To my mind, there is only one possible human response. This can never happen again.

I have lived with the voice of Takakura-san for two years, with its strange music, its trembling, its warmth. There were many moments I wanted to walk away from this project, to close my eyes to the horror I was re-creating on screen. Takakura-san's voice urged me forward, asking me not to forget while lending me the strength to continue.

I started animating OBON with a prayer. It was this little scene at the house altar that gave me the key to Takakura-san: she seemed at peace with the world that was so cruel to her. Would that be possible if her father hadn't washed her hands after the bombing? What does an act of love in a moment of despair mean? Can it allow you to go on with a normal life, drink tea and cook rice? If you have seen so much death, can you still look people in the eyes, get married and give birth to children?

The only time I met Takakura-san was in a dream, at a bus stop. It was raining, or maybe I was crying, but she gave me a hug before boarding the bus.





A CONVERSATION WITH THE DIRECTORS /// ANNA SAMO & ANDRÉ HÖRMANN

What brought you to Japan to start the process of making this film?

AH: I was always interested in Hiroshima, but I didn't have any connection to it. I was just so bewildered by this ferocious idea that someone could drop a bomb and destroy a group of 100 thousand people in an instance. After spending some time in Japan on an artist's grant from Germany, I quickly realized that the last living survivors of the atomic bomb were going to pass away, so this was the last chance to learn of and capture the raw emotion of their experiences.

What brought you two together to make this film?

AH: We met in 2001 and I always admired Anna's work as an animator. This is my first animated documentary, so I immediately thought to go to Anna for advice. I asked if she could read the script that I had so far and if she could mock up some of the characters as I worked to secure funding. The sketches were amazing and then we decided that it would be great to work together.

AS: When André gave me the script and I read it, I started crying at the end. I was so quickly attached to the story and the characters and André asked if I would do some more designs and eventually asked if I would direct the animation. Our budget was too small, so we could not hire the animators who I would have trusted with a story like this. At the same

time I felt so connected to the images and couldn't accept the sketches that came in. So I ended up animating the whole film myself.

What drew you to Ms. Takakura's story specifically?

AH: During my time researching the atomic bomb in Japan, I conducted around 10 interviews. All of the stories were solely filled with horror and grief, by the end of each interview everyone was wiped out. I had these gruesome images playing in my head.

Ms. Takakura was different, in the stories that she told me there was always a glimmering light of hope in the midst of all of the horror. For me, it was a sigh of relief to have this moment of hope and peace, it was beautiful. It is impossible to just tell a story that is all pain. Ms. Takakura's story was a way for me to look at this dark piece of history and not be emotionally crushed.

Was it hard to get Ms. Takakura to open up?

AH: I met Ms. Takakura around 3 times, each meeting was not very long. She was 84 at the time and I could feel that after 1.5 hours, it was enough talking for that day. In my mind it would be incredibly difficult to earn each subject's trust, I wasn't sure if she would react positively. I didn't know if I could ask personal questions, but it turned out that she was very open. It wasn't hard, she was very willing to tell her story.

What made you structure the film around the Obon Ceremony?

AH: I like fragmented storytelling. Obon-fest seemed like a very smooth way to tell the story. People get visited by the ghosts of their ancestors and remember moments with them and since this is an animated film, I thought that this period of reflection would give us the opportunity to go inside the hero's head. I also wanted to bring the 84 year old woman to the screen, it was important to not just see her younger self at the time of the bomb. If we had told the story only in the past, she would not have the opportunity to impart the perspective that she does today.

The score is like nothing I have heard before, tell us about the process of picking and working with your composer.

AH: My initial thought was that I don't like music that leads your emotion too much and I like to treat music like an actual sound collage so that it fits seamlessly with the sound of the entire piece. It's all one and you can't distinguish what is the music specifically. It's disturbing and at some points you have some fragments that are emotional and moving but it's never telling its own story, it's adding to the whole story.

AS: Our composer Daniel, André and I all actually went to the same film school, just at different times. For OBON Daniel opened his grand piano and played on the strings inside of the piano. He recorded it and layered the sounds over one another. He would make a sort of orchestra out of it. I liked the idea of tearing apart the grand piano as if you are playing on the nerves of the instrument. It worked perfectly for the story.

One of the most devastating moments of the film is the close shot of the burning hands. It is difficult to watch. Did you have to show it?

AS: The burning hands of the dead is one of Takakura-san's strongest memories. In her testimony she remembers having thought to herself: these could be the hands that would hold a child or turn the pages of a book. While translating the script into images it would become clear to me, that there was a story told by hands, an arch spanning over the duration of the film. We have the dirty hands of little Akiko that get her in trouble with her father at the beginning. There is a close up of the burning hands. There is a line of life on the hand of Akiko's colleague. And next to the line of life, there is a forest of burning hands, symbolizing the lost lives. At the end there are the hands being washed. It was horrible to animate the burning hands, but I had to show it to make this arch clear.

It sounds like this was not the easiest film to make, would you change anything about the process of making this film?

AS: I see the world in a very different way now. There is a part of me that that will never be the same after making OBON. I used to be very naïve, optimistic and joyful in my art. It was my power. I do not know if I would be able to get back to that place again. Out of all the films I have worked on, OBON had the biggest impact on me, but this is life and I would not change a thing about it.

Why is this story still important today?

AS : I remember coming back from Berlin after the sound mix of OBON. The first thing I saw on a monitor at JFK airport was the tweet of President Trump talking about how his button is bigger and more powerful than the one of Kim Jong Un. It was unbelievable.

AH: When we started working on OBON we thought we were doing a film about a historic event. We could not even imagine that the political reality would twist in such a nightmarish way, that this film would become extremely relevant.



AWARDS

SILVER DRAGON AWARD (Oscar qualifying)

for Best Short Animated Film
58th Krakow Film Festival

WOMEN IN ANIMATION AWARD

for Excellence in Animation Filmmaking
49th ASIFA East Animation Film Festival

BEST IN SHOW AWARD

49th ASIFA East Animation Film Festival
New York City

SPECIAL JURY MENTION

6th Insomnia International Animation Festival
Kaluga, Russia

SPECIAL JURY MENTION

46th Huesca International Film Festival

CERTIFICATE OF EXCEPTIONAL CULTURAL VALUE

German Film Evaluation Agency
(Filmbewertungsstelle Wiesbaden)

FESTIVALS

25. Stuttgart International Festival of Animated Films

International Competition - April 2018, Germany

Docaviv International Documentary Film Festival - Tel Aviv, Israel

Short Film Competition - May 2018

58. Krakow Film Festival - Krakow, Poland

Short Film Competition - May/June 2018 Poland

Animafest Zagreb World Festival of Animated Film, Croatia

Grand Competition - Short Film June 2018

46. Huesca International Film Festival - Huesca, Spain

International Short Film Competition - June 2018

2018 Palm Springs International Shortfest - Palm Springs, USA

Official Selection - June 2018

Insomnia International Animation Film Festival

Official Selection - July 2018, Kaluga Region, Russia

Anima Mundi - Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Short Film Competition - Sao Paulo, July/August 2018

Melbourne International Film Festival - Melbourne, Australia

Animation Shorts Competition - August 2018

17th International Animation Festival - Hiroshima, Japan

Animation for Peace - August 2018

Encounters Film Festival - Bristol, UK

Animated Film Competition - September 2018

Heart Of Gold International Film Festival - Gympie, Australia

Official Selection - October 2018

KLIK Amsterdam Animation Festival - Amsterdam, Netherlands

Animated Film Competition - October 2018

New Orleans Film Festival - New Orleans, USA

Animated Film Competition - October 2018

Chicago International Film Festival - New Orleans, USA

Animated Film Competition - October 2018

International Weekend of Animation - Wiesbaden, Germany

Best of German Animation 2017/2018 - Oct/Nov 2018

Duisburger Filmwoche - Duisburg, Germany

doxs! - November 2018

Hiroshima International Film Festival - Hiroshima, Japan

Official Selection - November 2018

Hawaii International Film Festival - Hawaii

Animated Film Competition - November/December 2018

London International Animation Festival - London, UK

Animated Film Competition - November/December 2018

CINANIMA International Animation Festival - Espinho, Portugal

International Competition for Short Films - November 2018



CREDITS

directed by André Hörmann and Anna Samo

written by André Hörmann

art direction and animation Anna Samo

script consultant Katrin Milhahn

music Daniel Regenberg

sound design Christoph de la Chevallerie

foley Peter Roigk

postproduction coordinator Julia Suermondt

cast Emir Suzuki, Yoko Fujita, Eiji Yano

Miho Ohasho, Masahiro Nonaka

dubbing directors Sascha Berner, Eiji Yano

translation Takaé Konagai

line producer (Japan) Tomoko Nishizaki

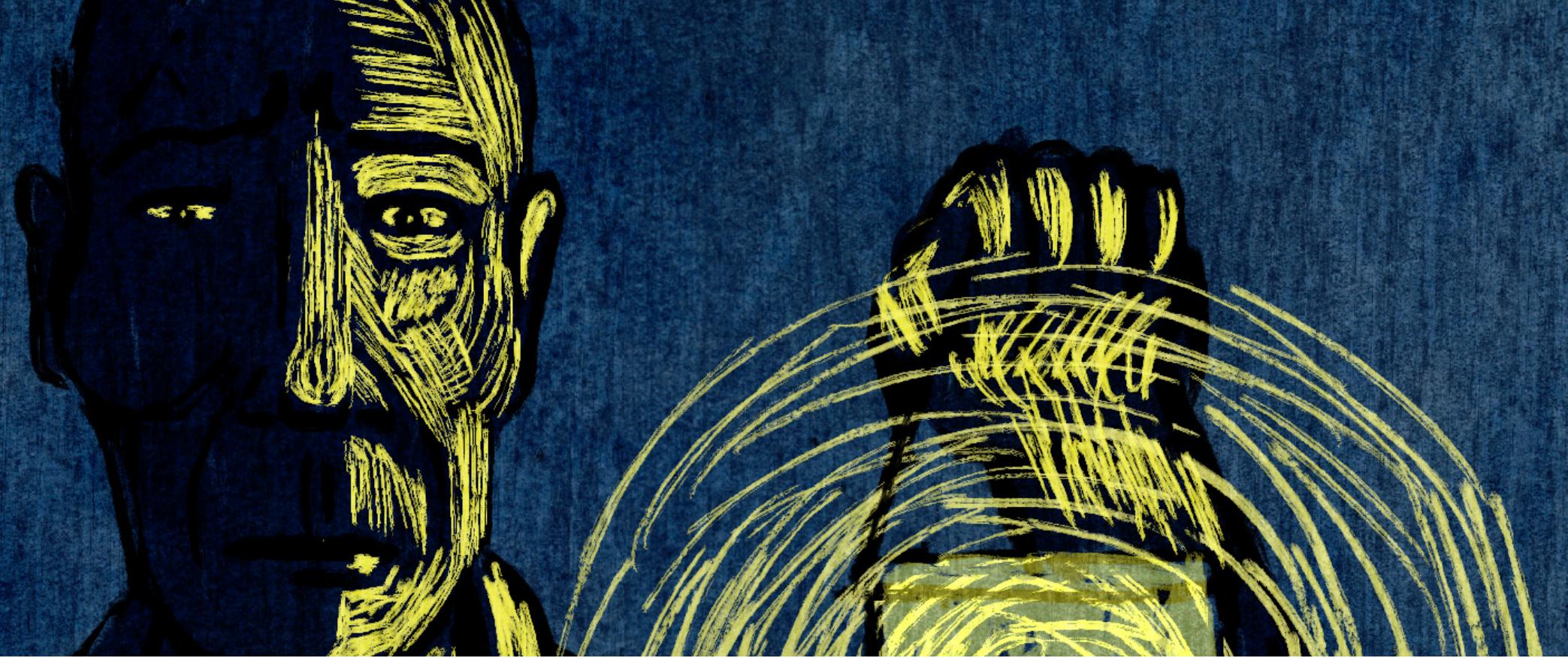
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colorgrading Farbkult

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in coproduction with Tiger Unterwegs Filmproduktion

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