

ALL ARE WELCOME HERE

OKKO'S INN



WAKA OKAMI WA SHÔGAKUSEI! (OKKO'S INN) is a Second Quarter 2019 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that charming family feature animation from Japan.

17 of a possible 20 points

****1/2 of a possible ****

Japan 2018 color 95 minutes feature animation family fantasy dramedy
 Dream Link Entertainment (DLE) / Madhouse / Kodansha / Wakaokami Project
 Producers: Masahiko Abe, Shuhei Arai, Hideharu Gomi, Aya Iizuka,
 Tatsuya Ishiguro, Satoki Toyoda, Shinnosuke Wada, Kazuhiro Yokoyama,
 Tomoki Yunokuchi, and Michele Zee

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- Co-Direction: Kitarô Kosaka and Tomohisa Shitara
- Unit Direction: Kitarô Kôsaka
- English-Language Cast Voice Direction: Michael Schneider
- 1 Editing: Takeshi Seyama, Kashiko Kimura, Yuki Nagao, and
 Yoshinori Okamoto
- 1 Cinematography: Michiya Katou
- 2 Lighting / Color Design: Terumi Nakauchi, Ryô Tokusa
- Visual Effects Supervision: Michiya Katou
- 2 Screenplay: Reiko Yoshida, based on the juvenile novels by Hiroko Reijo
- 1 Music: Keiichi Suzuki and Robert Schumann ("Traumerei")
- 2 Production Design: Kyoko Yauchi* Art Direction: Yôichi Watanabe*
- Costume Design: Parako Shinohara and Yui Ôsaki
- 2 Animation: Tsutomu Awata, Atsuko Fukushima, Yuka Hara,
 Shunsuke Hirota, Takeshi Honda, Megumi Kagawa,
 Naoko Kawahara, Kumiko Kawana, Masahiko Kubo,
 Yuka Matsumura, Hiroko Minowa, Ryôsuke Mizuno,
 Yoshiharu Sato, Yasumitsu Suetake, Yuko Tagawa,
 Morimoto Tokura, Shigeto Tsuji, Shinichiro Yamada,
 Hirômi Yamakawa, Shiji Ôtsuka
- 2 Sound Direction: Masafumi Mima*

Sound Effects: Shizuo Kurahashi* and Sachiko Nishi*

Sound Recording: Sae Miyoshi*

Sound Mixing: Sayaka Ninomiya*

2 Voice Acting

2 Creativity

17 total points

Voices Cast: Seiran Kobayashi (j) (Okko a.k.a. Oriko Seki), Nana Mizuki (Matsuki Akino), Satsumi Matsuda (Yari-bôï a.k.a. Makoto Tateuri), Rina Endô (Miyo Akino, deceased sister of Matsuki), Etsuko Kozakura (j) (Suzuki, bell demon), Yoko Asagami (Mineko Seki, Okko's grandmother), Kana Hanazawa (Mineko Seki as a girl), Teiyû Ichiryûsai (Etsuko Tajima), Masaki Terasoma (Kônosuke Minoda), Fumiko Orikasa (Torako Kise, Shôta's mom), Mikako Komatsu (Akane Kanda, a motherless teen boy), Masato Tanaka (j) (Shôta Kise), Chiaki Horan (Gurôri Suiryô, a fortuneteller), Kenneth Aikens (Uribo, boy ghost and playmate of Okko's grandmother), Glynis Bell (Mineko Seki, Okko's Grandmother), Courtney Chu (Yoriko), James Weaver Clark (Okko's father), Brittany Cox (Glory Suiryô), Michael Deaner* (j) (Shôta Kise, a boy preschooler), Tessa Frascogna* (Miyo, Mineko's deceased older sister, now a ghost), Nicolai Gorden (Kôsui Konda, Akane's widower father), Madigan Kacmar* (Okko), Colleen O'Shaughnessy* (Suzuki, bell demon), Alyson Leigh Rosenfeld (Okko's mother), Erica Schroeder, Ryan Shanahan, and Scott Williams (Additional Voices), Osamu Shitara (Kôsui Kanda), Anju Suzuki (Sakiko Seki), Carly Williams* (Matsuki Akino), Noa Fe Williams (Izumi), Hirohide Yakumara (Masaji Seki), Kôichi Yamadera (Bunta Rise)

WAKA OKAMI WA SHÔGAKUSEI!, known generally in English as OKKO'S INN – though the title literally translates as “THE YOUNG INNKEEPER IS A GRADE-SCHOOLER” – is an anime production of Madhouse and Dream Link Entertainment designed specifically to attract the attention of middle school girls. Primarily helmed by former Studio Ghibli concept guru and character designer, Kitaro Kosaka, it retains Miyazaki-like mettlesome junior heroines who are physically clumsy and initially over-indulged. This drama also maintains

the Ghibli tradition of friendly tutorial spirits who serve frequently as ironic or sarcastic guides. Contending princesses, shorn of regal titles, are centrally located at the heart of this drama's conflict, as in many Miyazaki sagas.

Here, a somewhat reserved Okko clashes repeatedly with more assured and competent rival Matsuki, a girl as devoted to book lore as the former is to conversational direction from spirits of dead children. Shinto beliefs about ancestral reverence and oversight of the living by forebears serve as keys to understanding the process by which naively self-centered Okko gradually comes to accept the reality of departed parents and assume responsibility to serve others unselfishly, regardless of personal feelings about them. Her grandmother's inn has a slogan she takes to heart as a kind of mantra: all are welcome here.

What that means will only be grasped by the girl after a succession of visitors supply enlightenment about the universal nature of grief. Mourning will eventually overtake everyone. How it is managed determines whether an individual personality shrivels into socially useless reclusiveness or more beneficial altruistic service.

In early film episodes, Okko is fearful of unpredictable nature, demandingly grumpy when not positioned in a familiar urban milieu, disrespectful of tradition, unable to judge merit and talent in others. Neither bookish nor inherently gregarious, she makes herself rather a bother to people around her. She appears to have no future ambitions. In that regard, the blasé traveler is far removed from being her mother's daughter. Fortunately for Okko, Mom and Dad are willing to overlook her rude egoism and forthright spurning of folkways.

Everything changes drastically, however, as the family rides back to the city. Skidding vehicles and a hurtling truck suddenly create a deathtrap. In a matter of mere seconds Okko becomes a surviving orphan. Dazed, she glimpses a boy floating in the sky above her. Her feverish imagination turns this image into a persisting memory of someone she regards as a providentially timely lifesaver.

At this point, the narrative bypasses crushing guilt the child would presumably feel as the only occupant of her family's car to escape death. This is probably the film's most significant plot failure. Such an oversight might trace back to the film's manga source. So it is not necessarily a shortcoming of the OKKO'S INN production team.

Emerging apparently unscathed from the auto accident, Okko becomes the legal ward of her grandmother, who runs a small inn located beside the Harunoya hot springs, famous for their healing properties. After terrifying encounters with a harmless spider and heat-seeking gecko, the reluctant new arrival discovers guests at the inn share quarters with a boy nicknamed Uri-bô, who once upon a time had been a mortal companion of Okko's grandmother. Of course, back then Grandmother Mineko was a reckless tomboy who, falling from a slippery roof tile one day, had landed in the arms of Makoto Tateuri, otherwise known as Uri-bô.

Later, the heroic boy had a similar experience while walking rooftops. Except no life preserver showed up conveniently below in his case. The result was instant transformation into a guardian spirit dedicated to keeping Mineko Seki and her granddaughter from harm. His protective powers don't seem to have extended to endangered adults.

Under prodding from this amiable wraith only she can see, Okko stammers out a request to assist Grandmother in operating her inn. At first, this seems a recipe for general disaster. The "junior innkeeper" stumbles along as she goes about new duties, embarrasses guests with tactless remarks, tires easily from the unaccustomed workload hospitality entails.

At school, Okko manages to immediately make an enemy of snobby Matsuki Akino, accidentally blurting out a mocking nickname of "Frilly Pink" while engaged in heated defense of family business. The Akinos run a competing hotel, one with enticements such as a health food menu and scenic balcony overlooks. On the premise bigger is better, Miss Akino deems a humbler Seki establishment suitable for disparagement. She labels its juvenile staffer a "sillykeeper."

Though fellow students side with the hot-tempered hostess-in-training, it's clear she's overmatched professionally by Matsuki's frosty elegance and superior knowledge.

Following classic storytelling structure, Okko faces three challenges arising from visitors to her Grandmother's business. The first is a father-son duo attempting to find solace after a death in their family. Akane, a long-haired teenage boy, has recently lost his mother. He's devastated emotionally. His dad has been unable to block the youth's slide into aggressive insolence.

Insisting on a certain type of cake to eat, this bafflingly unfriendly guest provokes both Okko, who cannot simply conjure it from thin air, and Mr. Kanda, duly apologetic for his son's alienating behavior. In the face of this first grave challenge to her assumed role of universal accommodation, Okko decides to bring Akane the closest thing she can concoct to his request: a hot springs pudding. Surprise! The malcontent eats and loves it, starting him on the path to therapeutic recovery. So pleased is his father with that unexpected turnaround he rewards Okko and her grandmother by promoting the inn in a featured travel magazine article with accompanying lavish photo spread. Score one point for the Junior Innkeeper.

Okko's next job emergency takes the form of glamorous fortuneteller Glory Suiryo, who's in shocked rustication after being dumped by a boyfriend. Fulfilling this guest's orders for costly specialty drinks again taxes available resources, but in the process of doing that Okko learns to listen to woes of others, beginning to grasp life has not singled her out for unique punishment. It seems Glory's downfall is evaluating people on the basis of what they own, clearly evident in her condescending patronage of the bereaved protagonist. Completely unable to cope with her younger friend's panic attack while in route to a supermall, Glory can think of nothing better to restore normalcy than a shopping spree. Through interactions with that unhappy materialist, Okko learns how shallow relationships defined mainly by economic status are.

Meanwhile, two other spirits reveal themselves to the heroine: an impish Miyo, first female child of the Akino family, and bell demon Suzuki, incidentally freed from boxed storage by Okko during investigative exploration. Miyo is a self-appointed defender of Matsuki, her younger sister, who hadn't even been born at the time the elder girl drew her last earthly breath. Glutton Suzuki, a prophetic know-it-all, acts as peacemaker and brake whenever opponents Miyo and Uribo mix it up trying to uphold the honor of their respective protégés.

Okko's third test arrives with the Kise family, whose youngest child, a boy preschooler, is first seen onscreen trying to squash a harmless gecko. Converted by this time into practicing conservationist, the apprentice innkeeper distracts him with conversation. The two children hit it off affably together, causing Mr. and Mrs. Kise to opt for at least an overnight stay at the Seki inn.

Mr. Kise turns out to be quite a grouch, discontent with dietary strictures imposed by his doctor for valid health reasons. He requires a lot of unusual specialty dishes. Just the type that horrible prig Matsuki lectures about.

Gritting her teeth, Miss Perfect Hostess sets out to mend fences with a girl whose patience she had exhausted earlier at ritual dance rehearsals where her best efforts undermined Matsuki's customary perfect movements. Knowing her number one enemy is the likeliest source of information about what to provide for that evening's dissatisfied guest, Okko sets off to try her luck at reconciliation and cooperation. Can she manage to placate both Matsuki and Mr. Kise on the same critical night?

There's another tense complication involved in this final trial. To disclose its nature would ruin the film for those who haven't yet seen it. Just be aware the dramatic stakes are much higher than they first appear to be. Prepare to pass through emotional wringer territory.

Artwork and animation alike are exemplary. Overriding pastels in daytime and school scenes contrast effectively with somber counterparts in climactic nocturnal passages. With one exception already noted above, Reiko Yoshida's screenplay keeps action bubbling along energetically, though never at any breakneck pace. Keiichi Suzuki's music is low-key, effectively supportive of high drama in flashbacks to the auto accident and equally comfortable accompanying childish slapstick, as when offended Miyo draws a mustache on Okko after she thoughtlessly lets slip the uncomplimentary "Frilly Pink" moniker during her first confrontation with Matsuki.

Please be aware huge eyes imposed on every child in this film do take some adaptation to accept as normal.

With a potentially downbeat combination of morbid circumstances and necessary farewells, OKKO'S INN successfully balances comedy and tragedy, something very few Western animations have mastered so well. Recorded sound displays a parallel deftness in preserving tonal clarity and individual intonations across a wide array of volumes. Lighting is never less than fully satisfying, enriching aesthetically ingratiating color gradations.

Nor is there any disappointing vocal performance. At least not in the English dub. Tessa Francogna's sparkly, sassy Miyo, Colleen O'Shaughnessy's complacent, freedom-loving Suzuki, Madigan Kacmar's frequently overwhelmed Okko, Carly Williams's smugly intellectual Matsuki, and Michael Deaner's

impulsive, endearingly effusive Shôta perhaps offer the most rewarding characterizations. Though the rest of the cast is quite capable, too.

Bonus features on the Shout! Factory dvd release are a four and one-half minute director interview with Kitaro Kosaka; a charming three and three-quarter minute interview with Okko's teenage Japanese voice actress, Seiran Kobayashi; a hilariously disparaging Q and A at the Japanese Premiere featurette constituting twenty-one minutes of target practice deflating viewer expectations about the anime; and four and three-quarters total minutes of trailers and tv spots promoting OKKO'S INN.

Despite its misleading MPAA rating of PG, OKKO'S INN is exceptionally fine viewing for youngsters ages ten and up. Shout! Factory's appealing dubbed in English option makes it conveniently available to middle school and high school audiences throughout North America. All those interested in promoting quality film experiences for teens should take due notice and become actively involved in getting this film much-needed Stateside publicity. It's easily one of the best and most artistic animes to appear in recent years, possessing a cathartic tug worthy of the best in that field. Make sure you don't overlook this underrated jewel.