

A HIROYUKI OKIURA FILM  
LETTER  
TO  
MOMO



tiff. toronto  
international  
film festival

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY HIROYUKI OKIURA  
KAREN MIYAMA, YUKA TOSHIYUKI NISHIOKA KOICHI YAMADERA CHO  
KEY ANIMATION SUPERVISOR MASASHI ANDO ADDITIONAL ANIMATION SUPERVISOR TOSHIYUKI INOUE  
ART DIRECTOR HIROSHI DNO MUSIC MINA KUBOTA COLOR GRADER HOBUKO MIZUTA SOUND DIRECTOR KAZUHIRO WAKABAYASHI ANIMATION PRODUCTION PRODUCTION LG  
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# A LETTER TO MOMO

A FILM BY HIROYUKI OKIURA

WINNER GRAND PRIZE – NEW YORK INT'L CHILDREN'S FILM FESTIVAL

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## “Four Stars!”

“A freshness and urgency that moved this reviewer to tears!”  
- Japan Times

## “Four Stars!”

“Those of you who got teary-eyed watching the opening montage of Pixar’s ‘Up’ will want to keep a few tissues handy as ‘Momo’s’ plot line reaches its climax.”  
- Honolulu Star Advertiser

## “One of the Best Animated Films of the Year!”

“A milestone in traditional handmade animation... the wonderful craftsmanship shines on screen! Truly beautiful to watch!”  
- Twitch

## “Stunning!”

“As gorgeous as ‘Momo’ is to behold, the film’s sensitive portrayal of a teenager dealing with grief proves its most compelling element. With its complex characterizations and multiple storylines, the teen rivals mature live-action drama. Even so, the animation medium is essential to its unique surreal touches— especially the stunning climactic sequence, which rivals even ‘Spirited Away’ as Momo’s mother falls ill and the spirits must intervene to help save her life.”  
- Variety

From the creators of *Ghost in the Shell* comes a wonderfully expressive and beautifully hand drawn tale that combines bursts of whimsy and kinetic humor with deep felt emotion and drama. The last time Momo saw her father they had a fight – and now all she has left to remember him by is an incomplete letter, a blank piece of paper penned with the words “Dear Momo” but nothing more. Moving with her mother to the remote Japanese island of Shio, Momo soon discovers three *yokai* living in her attic, a trio of mischievous spirit creatures that only she can see and who create mayhem in the tiny seaside community as she tries desperately to keep them hidden. But these funny monsters have a serious side and may hold the key to helping Momo discover what her father had been trying to tell her. *A Letter to Momo* was seven years in the making, and the handmade animation is superb, from the painstakingly rendered serenity of the island's Shinto shrines to the climactic finale – a frantic chase featuring thousands of squirming, morphing ghosts and spirits that is the best cinematic flight of supernatural fancy in many years.



## CREDITS

### CAST – VOICES (Japanese)

Momo Miyaura	Karen Miyama
Ikuko Miyaura	Yuka
Iwa	Toshiyuki Nishida
Kawa	Koichi Yamadera
Mame	Cho
Great Grandmother	Ikuko Tani
Great Grandfather	Yoshisada Sakaguchi
Umi	Katsuki Hashimoto

### CREW

Directed by:	Hiroyuki Okiura
Original Screenplay by:	Hiroyuki Okiura
Film Editor:	Junichi Uematsu
Original Music by :	Mina Kubota
Cinematographer:	Koji Tanaka
Art Director:	Hiroshi Ohno
Animation Director :	Masashi Ando
Animation Studio :	Production I.G
Key Animation Supervisor :	Masashi Ando
Storyboard :	Hiroyuki Okiura
Co-Producers :	Keiko Matsushita, Motoki Mukaichi, Mariko Noguchi, Arimasa Okada
Executive Producers :	Kazuya Hamana, Hiroyuki Ikeda, Mitsuhisa Ishikawa, Shigeru Watanabe
Distributor (US) :	GKIDS Inc.

## FILMMAKER AND PRODUCTION BIOGRAPHIES

### **Hiroyuki Okiura** *Writer-Director*

Born in 1966 in Katano, Osaka Prefecture, Okiura is a natural talent in the world of animation, having started his professional career at the age of 16 with no academic background. His credits as animator include some of the most visually stunning animated feature films produced in Japan: *Akira* (1988, key animator), *Patlabor: The Movie* (1989, key animator), *Patlabor 2: The Movie* (1993, additional animation supervisor), *Memories* (1995, key animator), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995, character design, animation supervisor, layout artist), *Cowboy Bebop The Movie: Knockin' on Heaven's Door* (2001, opening credit sequence director and key animator) and the Palme d'Or-nominated *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004, character designer, animation supervisor). Okiura made his feature film directorial debut in 1999 with *Jin-Roh: The Wolf Brigade*, based on the script by Mamoru Oshii. The movie was selected for the 49th Berlin International Film Festival and won accolades in Japan and around the world. *A Letter to Momo* is his highly anticipated second directorial effort after more than a decade-long hiatus, and has won many prizes, including the Grand Prize for Best Feature Film at the 15th New York International Children's Film Festival and Best Animated Feature Film at APSA.

### **Masashi Ando** *Key Animation Supervisor*

Born in Hiroshima in 1969, Ando is considered one of the best animators in Japan. In 1990, while still a student at the Fine Arts Faculty of Nihon University, he was hired to work at the legendary Studio Ghibli. After working as a key animator on projects such as *Porco Rosso* (1992) and *Pom Poko* (1994), he was appointed key animation supervisor for *Princess Mononoke* (1997) at the tender age of 28 (a role he reprised a few years later on Oscar-winner *Spirited Away*). In 2003, Ando left Studio Ghibli to become a freelance animator, contributing to many projects helmed by the late Satoshi Kon, including *Paranoia Agent* (2000, character designer), *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003, key animation supervisor) and *Paprika* (2006, character designer and key animation supervisor). Ando collaborated with Okiura on character designs for *A Letter to Momo* and served as key animation supervisor.

### **Hiroshi Ono** *Art Director*

Born in 1952 in Aichi, Ono started out as a protégé of the late Shichiro Kobayashi, whose studio, Kobayashi Productions, he joined in 1977. There, he worked in the backgrounds department for classics such as Osamu Dezaki's *Nobody's Boy: Remi* and Hayao Miyazaki's *Lupin III: Castle of Cagliostro*. In 1983, he left Kobayashi Productions to establish his own shop, Studio Fuga, which he still runs to this day. Ono served as art director on *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Le Chevalier D'Eon* and *Tales of Vesperia: The First Strike*, and was also in the art departments for feature films such as *Akira* and *Jin-Roh: The Wolf Brigade*. While working as art director for the feature film, *Run, Melos!* (1992) he met Okiura, who was key animator supervisor for the film.

### **The Animation Studio: Production I.G**

Tokyo-based anime powerhouse Production I.G, established in 1987 by producer Mitsuhsa Ishikawa and animator Takayuki Goto (hence the I and the G), produced the animation for *A Letter to Momo*. Production I.G has produced numerous acclaimed animated feature films and TV shows, which have garnered critical acclaim from around the world. *Ghost in the Shell* reached #1 on the US Billboard Top Video Sales

Chart in 1996; *Jin-Roh: Wolf Brigade* (directed by Hiroyuki Okiura) was in the official selection at the 1999 Berlinale; and *Blood: The Last Vampire* (2000, directed by Hiroyuki Kitakubo) was awarded the Public Prize at Fantasia. The *Ghost in the Shell* franchise (three feature films and two TV series) has sold more than one million videos around the world and is slated for a Hollywood live-action remake. *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*, directed by Mamoru Oshii in 2004, became the first Japanese animation feature ever to be nominated for the prestigious Palme d'Or at the Festival de Cannes. In 2008, Mamoru Oshii's feature film, *The Sky Crawlers*, was nominated for the Golden Lion at the 65th Venice Film Festival and won 3 awards at Sitges in the same year. The studio's first 3D CGI animation feature film, *Oblivion Island: Haruka and the Magic Mirror* (2009), directed by Shinsuke Sato, was Animation of the Year at the 33rd Japan Academy Prizes. Hiroyuki Okiura's *A Letter to Momo* (2012), which had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, was voted Best Animated Feature Film at the New York International Children's Film Festival and at the 6th annual Asia Pacific Screen Awards, and was rewarded with six more international awards in France, Italy, Canada, the Czech Republic, Argentina and Japan.

Production I.G's vision is said to have deeply influenced many famous Hollywood creators, including Quentin Tarantino, with whom the studio collaborated on the animation sequence in the hit movie, *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*. Director James Cameron described *Ghost in the Shell* as "a stunning work of speculative fiction" and said of *Blood: The Last Vampire*, "The world will come to consider this work as the standard of top quality in digital animation." The Wachowskis drew inspiration from *Ghost in the Shell* in the making of their *Matrix* trilogy.

## FILMMAKER INTERVIEW

With Director Hiroyuki Okiura

### What are your earliest memories of going to the movies?

There weren't movie theaters in my neighborhood growing up, so until I was a middle schooler, my only chance to watch movies was either at school or at home on TV. I clearly remember watching the animated feature films that were aired on TV in the morning on holidays, like *Taiyo no Oji Hols (Hols: Prince of the Sun, 1968)*, *Nagagutsu o haita neko (Puss in Boots, 1969)* and *Dobutsu Takarajima (Animal Treasure Island, 1971)*.

### When did you start working with Production I.G?

I think the first time I worked with I.G was back in the 80s, when Mr. Ishikawa asked me to join a project called *Zillion*. I think he knew about me from Kazuchika Kise (one of Japan's top five animators, known for his work in *Patlabor 2*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Innocence*, *Blood the Last Vampire*) as Kise and I used to work at Anime R in Osaka. After that, I worked on two *Patlabor* movies, but my relationship with Production I.G really began when I worked on *Ghost in the Shell (1995)*. Before that, I used to go out drinking with Mr. Ishikawa quite often. But now that we work together, that suddenly stopped... I wonder why!

### How was it writing the script, and what was the inspiration behind it?

*Momo* was my first script and it was a struggle. I solicited advice from a lot of people throughout the writing process. I clearly remember every time key ideas popped into my mind : starting the movie with three droplets falling from the sky, or the straw boats scene. Those were very happy moments for me. In retrospect, there are a few things I would do differently now, and I hope to take those learnings to my next project. As for the idea for the story, I was inspired by real life (the three goblins, of course, are fictional!). I knew of a woman who had to take care of her family after her husband's sudden disappearance, and I thought the idea that the he could be watching over his family even after he has passed away was of great comfort in an otherwise very traumatic situation. I set the story on the Seto Inland Sea, a beautiful place where I spent summer vacations as a child. Shio Island is fictional, but is modeled after an island called Osaki Shimojima. The goblins were inspired by a book about *kibyoshi* (illustrated Edo-period books like the one *Momo* finds in the attic). I enjoy drawing *yokai* – they're easier and more fun to draw than humans. I added them for comic relief.

### What made you want to tackle such a sensitive subject as a father's death?

Everyone experiences the desire to remain connected with our loved ones who are no longer with us. I wanted to make a story about that feeling. It is something you can find in any culture around the world. I imagined that they watch over us from above, even though we can't see them. I was very careful in portraying delicate themes like life and death, and the goblins helped to keep it fun.

### A *Letter To Momo* took 7 years to make. Why did it take so long?

For starters, the screenplay alone took between 18 and 24 months, and then I had to make the storyboards, which weren't complete when production started. It was the first time I had to create my own story, as my previous movie, *Jin-Roh* was written by Mamoru Oshii. That turned out to be more time-consuming than I'd anticipated. I also personally supervised all the animation because I wanted the characters to move naturally,

and that was a huge amount of work. For me, it was a never-ending struggle to make the movie concise, and to see where I could shave even a second off.

**Why didn't you use CG, which is the more popular animation style?**

*A Letter to Momo* is done in traditional 2D animation, which means everything is first hand-drawn with pencil on paper, then scanned for coloring and photography. This is still the prevalent technique used in Japan these days, counter to the trend followed by the rest of the world, I guess. I'm not against computer-generated animation, and some CG has been used in this movie, too. However, I believe that if I'm telling a story about human feelings, the pictures should be coming from a pencil held by human hand, and not from a machine.

***A Letter To Momo* is so different from your last film, the dark and violent *Jin-Roh*. Why the switch?**

Dark, dramatic movies tend to be the most visually sophisticated, the kind that require the animators to give their best without compromise, and I've been involved in a lot of projects like that. But I've also always loved children's books (I clearly remember the first book I borrowed from the library, Astrid Lindgren's *Bill Bergson* series), especially the ones with illustrations. I like heartwarming stories, and I'd always wanted to create a story that would make the audience feel light and uplifted at the end. It's not that I don't like dark and serious stories, but I believe *Momo* is the result of my desire to do something that comes from me. Some may argue that the story itself is not particularly innovative, but I believe that these days movies like *Momo* are not made very often. I wanted to make a movie that makes people feel better after watching it.

**Did you make the movie for kids?**

I think I lost sight of a specific target for this film while making it. The characters' ages vary, so it's possible to follow the story from Momo's perspective, but also from her mother's, or even from the uncle's. A certain portion of the audience may even relate with the three goblins' clumsy way of dealing with a little girl like Momo in such a delicate situation. When the movie was released in Japan, we saw every age group represented at the theater, and there were a lot of people who were Ikuko's age and older in the audience.

**Would you ever make a live action movie?**

I'm an animator and I've never even thought about directing a live action movie. That would require a wealth of experience I don't have.

**Was it difficult to balance the realism and fantasy in *Momo*?**

It was a challenge to blend the realism of the human world with the comical mood brought by the three goblins. It had to look natural. My reference and source of inspiration was Isao Takahata's animated feature film *Jarinko Chie* (*Chie the Brat*, 1981). It is a movie with a strong comical component, yet every character is portrayed with the utmost care through their personality and gestures – the way they walk, or turn around when they are called – as if they were real people. I have never seen such care and thoroughness in other animations. It is the sum of all those subtle details and physical gestures that creates the personality of each character, which was what I wanted to achieve with this movie, and I personally checked every drawing to ensure it looked right.

**There are so many little details in the movie: the way the bridge is constructed, the lack of medical services on this rural island, the taste of lemon cake. Why is that important to you?**

I spent many a childhood summer vacation on the Seto Inland Sea where the story is set, but when I actually went there for research purposes I made a lot of new discoveries. So many things, and I wanted to include them all in the film! Of course, that wasn't possible so the details that were included needed to be just right. Believe me, the lemon cake is delicious!

**Were the goblins taken from Japanese folklore?**

The designs for all three goblins are original. I referenced old illustrations, like the ones in the book Momo finds in the attic, because I wanted them to look convincing. They took form quite spontaneously. At first Mame was a bit more grotesque, but that design proved unpopular among the staff, so I changed him into what he looks in the movie. In Japanese we have this expression, *kimokawaii*, which translates roughly to 'creepycute'. That's Mame. I basically used the three goblins as comic relief in an otherwise heavy situation, but the bizarre relationship between Momo and the goblins has been inspired by a Soviet-era Russian film called *Kin-dza-dza!* (1986), directed by Georgiy Daneliya.

**That's certainly a most unexpected source of inspiration! Can you tell us more about it?**

I don't remember exactly where I first heard about the movie. I guess it was from some movie magazine. There was a theatrical re-run in Japan, and the DVD was released shortly thereafter. So I purchased the DVD and watched it. It was a total surprise. The way the two main characters suddenly find themselves on another planet is pure genius. The design concept for the machinery appearing in the film was so amazingly unique. On top of that, I was fascinated by this rather odd situation where these two men from Earth act side by side with inhabitants from a different world, and yet they are able to understand each other. And they end up developing a sort of affection for those selfish aliens... until the moving finale. Vladimir and Gedevan, the two guys from Earth, don't really befriend with the aliens, but they are unable to remain emotionally uninvolved. I really liked that kind of situation, and I tried to replicate it in the relationship between Momo and the three goblins.

**Who was your inspiration for the main character, Momo?**

There's no specific model. I developed the character of Momo based on a few ingredients I had in mind -- not necessarily a strong personality, slightly introverted, but a fair bit stubborn as well. I made assumptions about how a kid that age would act: when she is with her mother, with other children, with adult people she's not really familiar with. I tried to render subtle aspects of her personality that are not revealed by her words, but through a variety of minimal gestures.

**Momo, Ikuko, Iwa, Kawa, Mame... Where did these names come from?**

Momo and Ikuko come from *Hyakki Yakō* 百鬼夜行, literally Night Parade of One Hundred Demons, a popular theme in Japanese visual art, and describes what happens at the end of the movie. The ideogram for *hyaku* (百 one hundred) can also be read "momo", which is a common name for girls (it can also mean 'peach' or 'pink'). The ideogram for *kō* (行 to go) is read *iku* in its verbal form, which added to the suffix *-ko* 子, used in Japanese female names (such as Motoko, Akiko etc.), becomes Ikuko (いゝく子). The names for the three goblins are more straightforward: *iwa* means "rock", *kawa* means "river", and *mame* means "bean", in this case used with the meaning of "tiny".

### **Is *A Letter to Momo* about a return to a Japan of years past?**

From Momo's standpoint, we can say that her move from the big, modern city to the traditional countryside is a reason for her distress. But in this movie, the scenery itself is a character. I want people to see this movie and want to visit the countryside. The Seto Inland Sea could become a place where people find their memories.

### **Nature is portrayed vividly in the film. Why is it so important? And why do the goblins coming out of the woods look so different from Kawa, Iwa and Mame?**

The goblins in Japanese folklore are personifications of natural phenomena, created to explain things that humans didn't understand. I thought that "actual" goblins wouldn't look like those drawn in books by human hand, but had to be something more in harmony with nature. So they don't wear garments or speak our language.

### **How did you pick a composer?**

I heard the music that Mina Kubota had composed for a TV series as we were discussing the score for the movie. I felt it was very close to what we needed for *A Letter For Momo*, so we contacted her. I described the overall atmosphere of the film, and the sound director, Kazuhiro Wakabayashi worked with her on the details. I think the result of their collaboration is just wonderful.

### **What was it like working with Masashi Ando, who directed the animation, and Hiroshi Ono, who drew the backgrounds?**

I asked Ando and Ono to join the project, because I really wanted to work with them. I worked with Hiroshi Ono almost 20 years ago on *Hashire Melos!* and I'd been waiting for an opportunity to work with him again ever since. His use of color is top-notch. As for Ando, we worked together for the first time on *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004), although I had known him from before. He is an astoundingly talented animator, and I felt the movie's style and Ando's personality matched perfectly, so it was easy for me to ask him to join. The result of having Ando and Ono on the team is clear for all to see. There could have been no *A Letter to Momo* without them. Really.

### **How was the reception in Japan?**

As I mentioned, it wasn't just children at the theater – there were couples who could have been Momo's parents or grandparents in the audience too. That was a bit unexpected, although I wasn't sure what to expect. Either way, it made me happy. The screenings in the Hiroshima were overwhelmingly successful, which was like their stamp of approval on how we rendered the look and feel of the setting.

### **What are you working on next?**

Nothing confirmed at the moment, but I'm thinking about a movie that can be enjoyed by kids, as well as another one that's tailored to adults.

### ***A Letter to Momo* is going to be released in the United States soon. Any message for your fans there?**

Don't be too harsh about its imperfections, just sit back and enjoy it!

## PRODUCTION NOTES

### Creating Shio Island

There is no Shio Island on the Seto Inland Sea. The fictional setting was modeled after the island of Osaki Shimojima, a small and picturesque two-thousand inhabitant island with a perimeter of just 16 miles, located in Hiroshima Prefecture, famous for its citrus orchards.

Although director Hiroyuki Okiura was born in Osaka, his family has roots in a small Hiroshima town on the Seto Inland Sea, where he spent the summer vacations of his childhood. When the *A Letter To Momo* project began, Okiura recalled his own childhood and decided to set the story in similar nostalgic surroundings. In March and August of 2006, Okiura, art director Hiroshi Ono and other members of the production team traveled to Osaki Shimojima and surrounding islands on a research trip.

Shio Island, with its terraced fields, breathtaking mountains and traditional wooden houses, was created by assembling different elements the team found in various locations.

The Miyajima Festival, where the island's fathers release straw boats to the sea (as it appears in the movie's finale), was inspired by an actual festival that takes place at the Itsukushima shrine, located in a UNESCO World Heritage site near Hiroshima. The ceremony is held as a prayer for the island's children to grow up strong and healthy, and originally began in the aftermath of the dropping of the atomic bomb on the city in World War II.

### Hand-drawn Animation

Okiura and his team of animators aimed to render each character as realistically as possible. Subtle gestures and the details of everyday life were given particular attention, in order to make the characters relatable. As Okiura explains, "These things may not look spectacular, but they are extremely difficult to render properly." To help him achieve the natural realism that is so apparent in *Momo*, Okiura recruited some of Japan's top animators: Masashi Ando (*Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away*), Toshiyuki Inoue (*Tokyo Godfathers*), Ei Inoue (*The Cat Returns*), Takeshi Honda (*Evangelion: 2.22 You Can (Not) Advance*), Tetsuya Nishio (*The Sky Crawlers*) and Hiroyuki Aoyama (*Summer Wars*).

*Variety* wrote, "Director Okiura's nuanced sense of gesture and body language yields such true-to-life movement, it suggests either extensive work with actor-models or the classic rotoscoping technique Walt Disney used to animate *Snow White*." In reality, no motion capture or rotoscoping was used in the making of *A Letter to Momo*. There are, however, a few scenes in the movie that benefited from CG animation. The motorboat that takes Ikuko to Imabari, the fan blades in Momo's house, part of the sequence with the wild boars and the bridge in the final scene were computer-generated. Okiura does not reject computer animation *a priori*; it can be an efficient way to animate certain items that could have been time-consuming if tackled manually. But the director, who does not use email or even carry a mobile phone, is staunch in his belief that subtle human feelings are best conveyed by human hand.