

FROM AYUMU WATANABE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN OF THE SEA

SANMA AKASHIYA PRESENTS

# FORTUNE FAVORS LADY NIKUKO



SHINOBU OTAKE | COCOMI | NATSUKI HANAE

DIRECTED BY AYUMU WATANABE | CREATIVE PRODUCER: SANMA AKASHIYA

BASED ON "GYOKO NO NIKUKO-CHAN" BY KAMANO NISHI, GENTOSHA | CHARACTER DESIGN AND SUPERVISING ANIMATION DIRECTOR: KENICHI KONISHI | ART DIRECTOR: SHINJI KIMURA

ANIMATION AND PRODUCTION DESIGN BY STUDIO4C | PRODUCTION COMPANY: YOSHIMOTO KOGYO CO., LTD.

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STUDIO4C

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SANMA AKASHIYA PRESENTS

# FORTUNE FAVORS LADY NIKUKO

## SYNOPSIS

Planned and produced by Japanese comedy legend Sanma Akashiya, based on his love for the original novel by Kanako Nishi, *FORTUNE FAVORS LADY NIKUKO* is a heartwarming and moving comedy-drama with touches of magical realism from lauded Studio 4°C (*Children of the Sea*, *Tekkonkinkreet*, *Mind Game*, *MFKZ*), and esteemed director Ayumu Watanabe (*Children of the Sea*).

*Fortune Favors Lady Nikuko* is about an unconventional family and the bonds that they share in their sleepy seaside town. Brash single mother Nikuko is well-known for her bold spirit, much to the embarrassment of Kikuko, her pensive yet imaginative daughter. In contrast to her mother, Kikuko wants nothing more than to fit in as she navigates the everyday social dramas of middle school. Life in the harbor is peaceful until a shocking revelation from the past threatens to uproot the pair's tender relationship.



# CREW

**Creative Producer:** Sanma Akashiya

**Original Story:** Novel “Gyoko no Nikuko-chan” by Kanako Nishi (“Gentosha Bunko”)

**Director:** Ayumu Watanabe (*Draemon: Nobita’s Dinosaurs* (2006), *Children of the Sea* (2019))

**Music:** Takatsugu Muramatsu

**Character Design & Supervising Animation Director:** Kenichi Konishi (*The Tale of The Princess Kaguya* (2013), *Children of the Sea* (2019))

**Art Director:** Shinji Kimura (*Tekkonkinkreet* (2006,) *Children of the Sea* (2019), *Dorohedro* (2020))

**Animation and Production Design:** STUDIO4°C (*Tekkonkinkreet* (2006), *Children of the Sea* (2019), *Poupelle of Chimney Town* (2020))

**Production Company:** YOSHIMOTO KOGYO CO., LTD.

**Runtime:** 96 Min

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# JAPANESE CAST

**Nikuko:** Shinobu Otake

**Kikuko:** Cocomi

**Ninomiya:** Natsuki Hanae

**Sassan:** Ikuji Nakamura

**Maria:** Izumi Ishii





## CREATIVE PRODUCER SANMA AKASHIYA | INTERVIEW

I first read Ms. Kanako Nishi's novel, "Fortune Favors Lady Nikuko", about five years ago. The first novel I read of Ms. Nishi's was the Naoki Prize-winning "Saraba!" The way she used the Osaka dialect in her writing impressed me. After that, I read all of her works. Among them, "Fortune Favors Lady Nikuko" moved me the most and I really wanted to adapt it into a film. When I made the offer, Ms. Nishi quickly consented, and we were able to realize it in this way.

Perhaps I relate to them too much, but I've always had a weak spot for stories about the love between a parent and a child. The Champ and Kramer vs. Kramer always make me cry (laugh). Stories about divorce or raising a child also make me tear up.

The fact that Nikuko and Kikuko came to this town from Osaka was also very relatable. Growing up in the Kansai region, I knew a lot of chubby, middle-aged ladies like Nikuko: always laughing loudly, cheerful, and a little irresponsible. They were fun and interesting. I definitely have fond memories of them.

At first, I thought of turning this into a live-action drama series. Ms. Nishi had appeared on my show, *Sanma no Manma*, as a guest. She brought me many books about Katsushika Hokusai, the ukiyo-e artist, mentioning, "Hokusai put everything into his art, the same way you put everything into comedy. To me, you two are similar. Ever since I was young, I thought you were the Hokusai of the Showa Era."



After some time, in the program *The Sanma Akashiya That No One Knows*, I did an MRI of my brain for the first time in my life. And I was informed then that the profession I'm most suited for was an art dealer (laugh). Around that time, there were talks of making *Fortune Favors Lady Nikuko* into an anime instead of live-action. Between Ms. Nishi, Hokusai, art dealer, anime—I thought, "I have to do it!" I have a traditional way of thinking, so I thought that maybe this was what the gods intended. I felt like there was a force nudging me forward to take this route, and I've been working hard ever since.

There are many things that Japan can be proud of and defend on the global stage. Anime is one of them. A long time ago, I had the opportunity to interview the soccer player Alessandro Del Piero in Italy. When I gave him some Captain Tsubasa manga as a gift, he excitedly told me that he used to watch the anime religiously when he was a kid. That was when I really recognized that the people we respect around the world also grew up watching anime from Japan.

On the other hand, comedians need to master English if we want to go global. That's why, for a comedian, the medium of anime makes us frustrated and jealous (laugh). However, I watch anime because I like it, and I understand its power. That's why I'm happy that I could be a part of it this time around.

I am involved in this project as the creative producer. If you were to think of creating a work as a hot pot, I'm the one who prepared the pot and the portable gas stove. And then, the staff and the voice actors brought various ingredients, and as the producer, my job was to scoop out the scum that rose to the top. That's truly how I felt. All of the scum has been removed, so please be at ease. I'm pretty good at removing scum, you know (laugh).

I would love it if everyone can enjoy this delicious hot pot!



## NIKUKO VOICED BY SHINOBU OTAKE

Everyone calls her Nikuko. She's currently 38 years old, and since moving to Osaka at 16, she's been speaking in the Osaka dialect.

She is farthest from being fashionable, wears a lot of loud, funny clothes. She is a gullible, softhearted person who falls in love quickly. She has a weak spot for deadbeat men, and every time they break her heart, she moves to another town with her daughter, Kikuko. Three years ago, she arrived at a small port town in northern Japan. She's been working at the grill house Uwogashi and living cheerfully ever since. She loves Kikuko from the bottom of her heart, often bragging about her in front of people. Her mantra: "Ordinary is the best of all."

## SHINOBU OTAKE | PROFILE

Born July 17, 1957, in Tokyo, Shinobu Otake debuted in *The Gate of Youth*. She starred in NHK's morning drama *Mizuiri no Toki* the same year. Since then, she's been starring in many movies, plays, and TV shows. Recent credits include *Our Little Sister* (2015), *Black Widow Business* (2016), *Flea-picking Samurai* (2018), and *Shadowfall* (2019). In addition, she has lent her voice to animated films such as *The Secret World of Arrietty* (2010), *The Wind Rises* (2013), *Mary and the Witch's Flower* (2017), and the Japanese dub of *Inside Out* (2015).

## SHINOBU OTAKE | INTERVIEW

When I was first contacted about this project and heard who the producer was, I was surprised. “Really, me?” was my reaction (laugh). Then I read the novel and the script. It was a warm story about a mother and daughter bond that cleansed your soul. I laughed and I cried, and I was truly happy. I knew that Mr. Sanma liked these types of heartwarming, hopeful stories. When we were married, we worked on an anime called *Lily ga Mita Yasashii Niji* (1990). It was based on the children’s book he wrote, and that was also a heartwarming story. So I thought, “He hasn’t changed at all.” At the time, he created it to show to our kids. It’s very nostalgic.

Regarding playing Nikuko, I spoke with the director and was especially conscious of being high-energy. Also, Nikuko isn’t originally from Osaka but speaks in an Osaka dialect. But I was told it doesn’t have to be a native Osaka dialect, but something along those lines. But I figured that I should incorporate the dialect, so I had the staff make an audio file to listen to so I could familiarize myself with it.

Mr. Sanma was there during recording and would conceive ideas, such as “Can you adlib here?” and frequently gave me sudden requests (laugh). For example, even if it wasn’t in the script, he might ask me to scream. Or in the part when Nikuko is humming, we took three completely different takes, so it was interesting (laugh). While Mr. Sanma was making jokes, Director Watanabe would be sitting next to him, giving me detailed directions. He would articulate the important aspects, which made it easy for me. I sensed that Mr. Sanma and the director had mutual respect, so it was a good session.

Nikuko is cheery, boisterous, carefree, and maybe a little simple, but very charming. The way that she eats a lot is refreshing. She is a character I fell in love with. Even when she faces hardship, she can laugh it off, and I respect that. It made me think that as a producer, Mr. Sanma really likes to see the faces of people laughing. And that’s why he made this movie. Nikuko’s words, “Ordinary is the best of all,” encouraged me.

Cocomi, who played my daughter Kikuko, always dreamt of being a voice actor. She even went to school for it. So for her to have this opportunity is wonderful. Unfortunately, I didn’t get to record with her, but Sanma has known Cocomi since she was a child, so I can imagine that he guided her with a lot of love. I’m looking forward to seeing the completed movie.

I am only providing my voice to the finished animation. But it makes me emotional when I think about how much work goes into creating an anime, drawing each shot, and how many people are involved. *Fortune Favors Lady Nikuko* is specific in how the scenes are blocked, and each shot is very cute, beautiful, and splendid. The producer set out to make a film that warms your heart, and he succeeded. I hope everyone can go watch it with their family.





## KIKUKO VOICED BY Cocomi

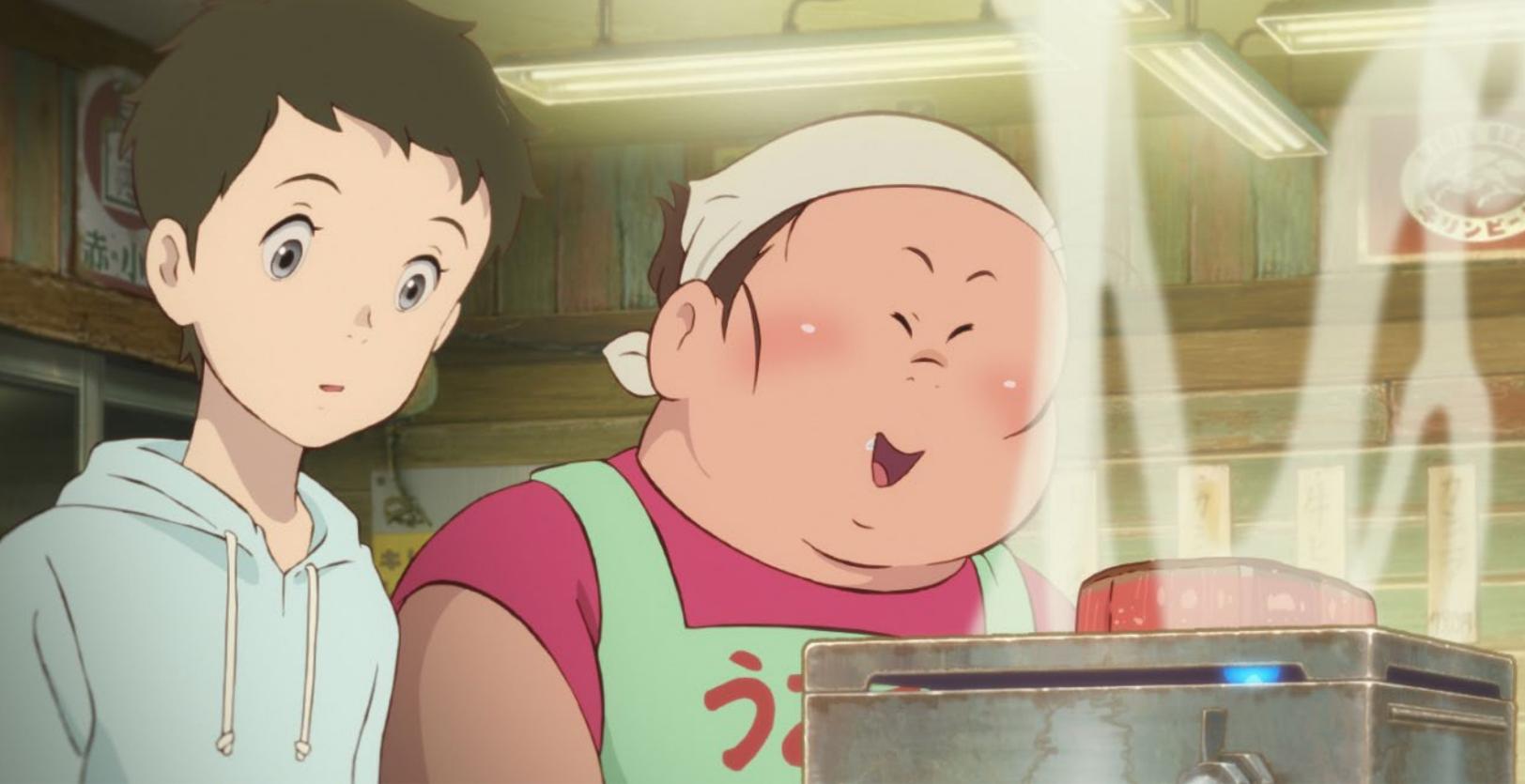
Nikuko's daughter. Her personality and looks are the complete opposite of Nikuko's. She is a well-rounded 5th grader.

She only speaks in the Osaka dialect in front of Nikuko. She speaks in the regional dialect with everyone else, prompting Sassan to call her "bilingual."

She has gotten accustomed to living in the port town, so she is anxious that Nikuko will eventually fall in-and-out of love again, and that they will have to move away. Lately, for some reason, she has been curious about her male classmate Ninomiya. Kikuko has been a bookworm since she was little, and her current favorite book is "Catcher in the Rye" by J. D. Salinger.

## Cocomi | PROFILE

Born May 1, 2001, in Tokyo, Cocomi is also a flutist and model. She has been playing the violin since age three and the flute since age eleven. She still receives lessons from Hiroaki Kanda of the NHK Symphony Orchestra. She won the Wind Instrument Music Competition in 2019.



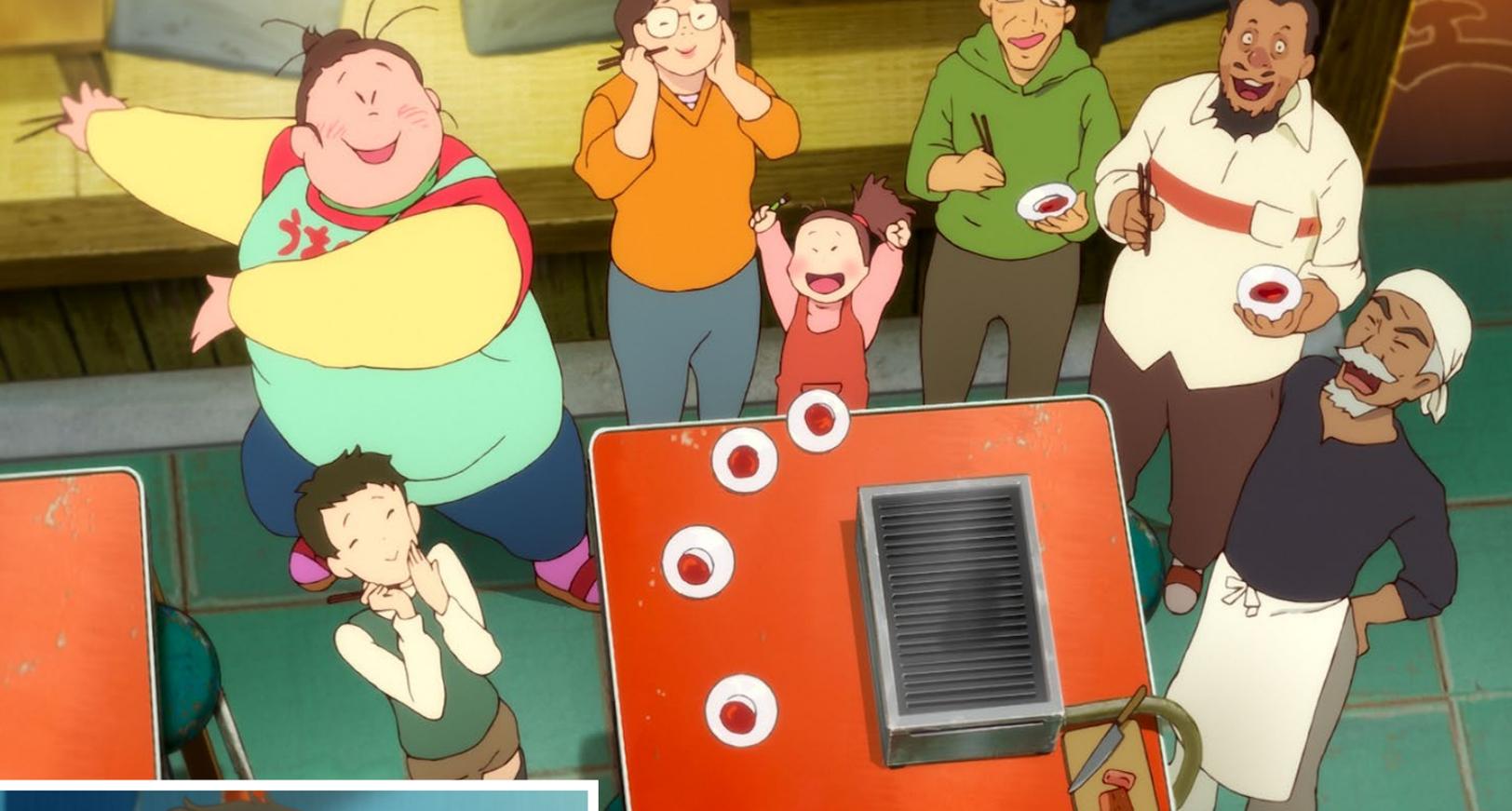
## Cocomi | INTERVIEW

Including the fact that I play music, the reason why I exist the way I do right now is heavily influenced by anime. I was honored to have been invited to this project by Mr. Sanma. I didn't think he remembered that I told him I was attending a voice acting school. For the recording test, I thought hard about how to play Kikuko. I read the original novel many times and tried to imagine what Kikuko was like on my own. Either way, it was very difficult. From the tiniest of reactions like how to breathe, I realized how much of a Herculean task it is to express yourself by only using your voice. I hoped that I was able to incorporate what I learned at school. So when I got the part, I was ecstatic (laugh).

Kikuko is very cool, straightforward, and well-rounded so that she can make up for her mother's clumsiness. But she also tends to go with the flow when the situation turns troublesome, and I was able to relate to that. While playing Kikuko, I always had this picture of a girl right smack in the middle of adolescence. So I made sure to express her emotions as an adolescent, or the sparkly moments that she would experience. On the other hand, Nikuko was always cheerful. Even if Kikuko was pouting, she was a mother who blew it all off with her smile. Throughout the film, I commentated as her straight-man with a lot of love (laugh).

Recording ADR for the film was a first for me. I felt a lot of pressure, and I was really nervous. But Mr. Sanma was at the studio, and he immediately softened my mood, and I felt at ease. Kikuko had a lot of lines in a semi-Tohoku dialect that was similar to the standard dialect. I did fine with those lines, but the Osaka dialect when speaking with Nikuko was difficult because of the accent, nuances, and slight difference in tone. I listened to a lot of radio and YouTube to test out variations. During recording, Mr. Sanma was strict in giving me lessons, too (laugh). Besides the dialect, Mr. Sanma came up with many ideas, like "Let's do this," or "Next take, can you say it with this kind of feeling?" Every direction was interesting, and changing the lines on the spot was challenging and a good learning experience.

My favorite scene in the film is the one with Nikuko in the hospital room. The score for the scene is great too, and it's deeply moving. Another memorable scene is when Kikuko sees the model that Ninomiya built. I was amazed that the visuals in the completed movie perfectly matched the atmosphere and imagery that I felt when reading the novel. It's a heartfelt story spun by a mother and her daughter, so I would love it if everyone could see it with the people they love.



## AYUMU WATANABE | DIRECTOR PROFILE

Born September 3, 1966, in Tokyo. He joined Studio Mates in 1986 and debuted as a key animator there. In 1988, he joined Shin-Ei Animation and was active in various roles, including key animator, animation director, and director. He directed the short theatrical *Doraemon: A Grandmother's Recollections* (2000), feature film *Doraemon: Nobita's Dragon* (2006), and transitioned to freelance directing in 2011. His other works include the TV anime *Space Brothers* (2012-2014) and *After the Rain* (2018). His *Children of the Sea* (2019) won Best Animation Film at the 74th Mainichi Film Awards and Grand Prize in Animation at the 23rd Japan Media Arts Festival Awards.

# AYUMU WATANABE

## INTERVIEW



I was elated that Mr. Sanma gave the medium of animation an opportunity. Ms. Nishi's novel was wonderful too, and I just wanted to live up to his enthusiasm for making it into an anime. I sincerely felt that way. When Producer Eiko Tanaka of Studio 4°C told me about this project for the first time, she handed me the copy of the novel that she had read and said, "It made me cry!" Ms. Tanaka is a person who has a keen eye for what should be made, but it left an impression on me how passionate she was for this project.

The original novel was the essence of Ms. Nishi. Various characters took on the aspects of the changes in women's mentality and the self-consciousness that they feel as they grow older. It also showed how it's important to accept and acknowledge yourself as you are. These themes were depicted in detail in her book. She wrote the story after she visited Ishinomaki and Onagawa in Miyagi prefecture. And after that, the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami struck the region. Although it was probably not intended, I felt that the novel connoted an unavoidable atmosphere. It is a story about women, but the male characters like Ninomiya and Sassan are also splendid. I knew that if I were able to tell the story of the novel successfully, it would become a good film.

I had many meetings with Mr. Sanma, from scriptwriting to table reading to storyboarding. I remember when we first met with the scriptwriter, Satomi Oshima. Someone had mentioned the concept and the marketing. Mr. Sanma bluntly shut that down: "That doesn't matter. It's more important to make sure the creators think it's interesting. It's a good story, so all they have to do is to value that as they make this movie." He is a man who has experienced many productions. I felt that he thinks first and foremost about making the most of the actors. He gave so many new ideas at the storyboard meetings that every meeting was beneficial.

In directing the movie, I cherished the flow of Kikuko's feelings. I wanted to recreate the literary flavor that the novel had, and I was specific about the monologues. This story doesn't have many dramatic turns. Kikuko's feelings and how they change are what drive the story. That's why I took my time to demonstrate Kikuko's character development. It would be instrumental if I could make the change in her feelings fit with the unique flow of time that animation has.

What I like about the film is the comedic interaction between Kikuko and Nikuko when they are talking about nothing in particular. I hope that the fact that Nikuko adores Kikuko really comes through on the screen (laughs). Also, I put much effort into Ninomiya's model. I thought that the model was an essential item in giving a bird's-eye view of the film. In that sense, the scene where Ninomiya shows Kikuko the secret location is





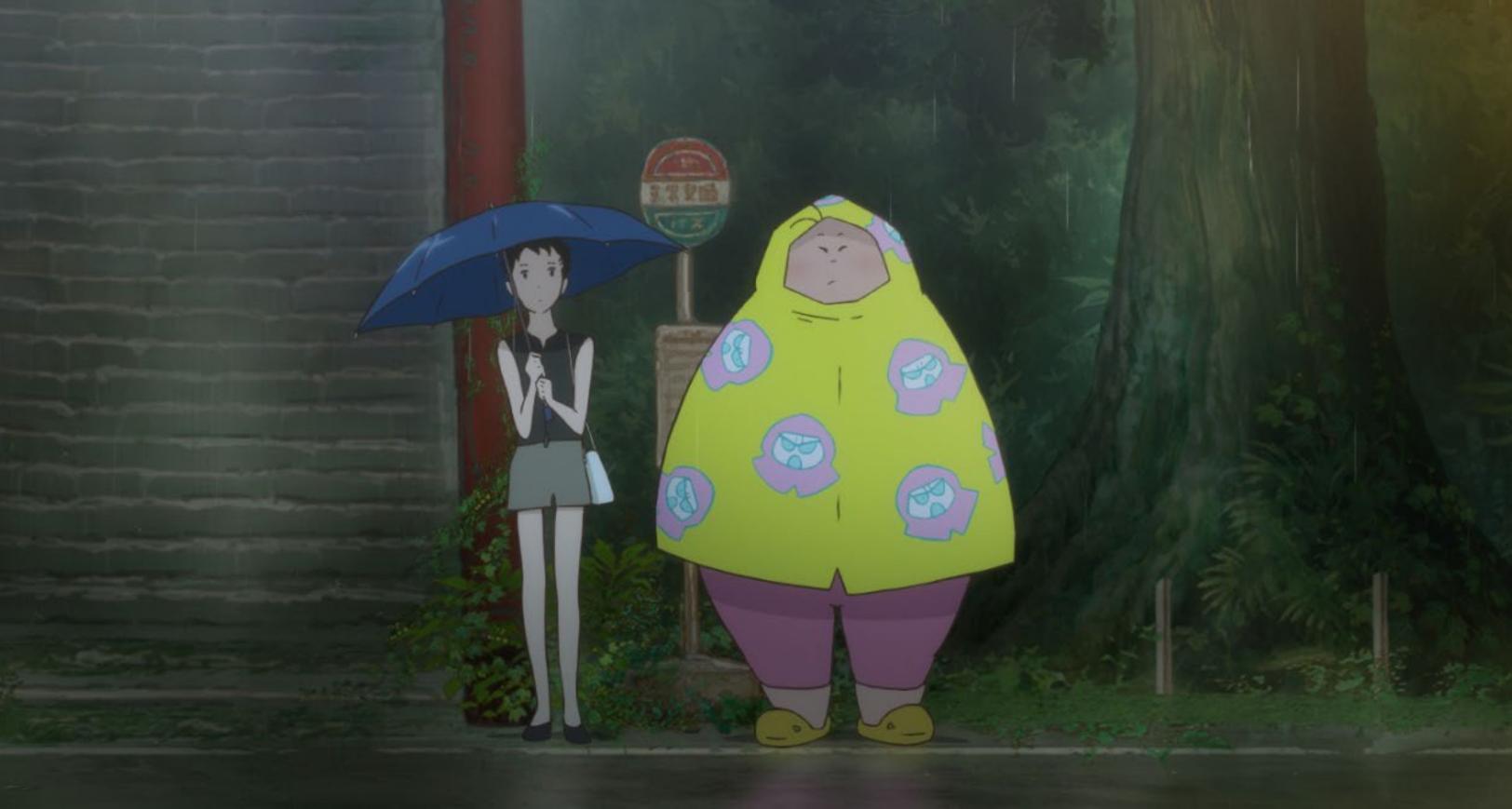
significant even though it's not depicted in the novel. And lastly, the scene where Ninomiya and Kikuko look up from the hospital room to see the first snow holds a special place in my heart. Actually, once I start listing my favorites, I'll never finish (laugh).

Ms. Shinobu Otake, who played Nikuko, is an actress whom I've watched on TV and in film for a long time. So when I was told that we could offer her the part, I couldn't hide my excitement (laugh). And in the recording booth, she delivered on the performance! It's not something for an anime director to say, but Ms. Otake's acting makes you think, "I wish I could see this on stage!" She responded quickly to every fickle order Mr. Sanma made at the booth, and even those, as we took more takes, only got better. I'm thrilled that we could keep a record of such a great person's acting within this film.

Ms. Cocomi, who made her debut as a voice actor as Kikuko, has a distinct voice. It's a voice that is younger than her age and matches that of a cute, adolescent girl. When I first heard her voice in a test, I thought it would be best not to have an elaborate performance that would diminish the texture of her voice. Ms. Cocomi had sharp intuition, and she was able to respond to Mr. Sanma's requests and had the grit to keep doing takes until she was satisfied. She acted both as the younger version of Kikuko as well, and also played the flute for us. She is a great actress with the potential to deliver even the most difficult of requests.

Including the scene where Ms. Otake hums *Hymne a l'amour*, there are many scenes that Mr. Sanma added on the spot in the recording studio. Even with the dialogue, he kept on changing it to make the lines even funnier. He thinks about making everything better until the very end, so he always has ideas up his sleeve. In that sense, the recording had somewhat of a live show feel, and it was interesting.

"Everyone has made someone laugh or smile at least once." That was what I had in mind while working on this film. And even if you weren't born there, the place that makes you think, "I want to stay here" will become your hometown. Maybe if you think, "I want to be with this person," they will also transcend blood relations and become family. I hope that this film can be something that reminds the audience of that.



## ABOUT GKIDS

GKIDS is the producer and distributor of award-winning feature animation for both adult and family audiences. Since 2010, the company has scored an astounding 12 Best Animated Feature Oscar nominations with *The Secret of Kells* in 2010, *A Cat in Paris* and *Chico & Rita* in 2012, *Ernest & Celestine* in 2014, *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya* and *Song of the Sea* in 2015, *Boy and the World* and *When Marnie Was There* in 2016, *My Life as a Zucchini* in 2017, *The Breadwinner* in 2018, *Mirai* in 2019, and *Wolfwalkers* in 2021. GKIDS handles North American distribution for the famed Studio Ghibli library of films, one of the world's most coveted animation collections with titles *Spirited Away*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Princess Mononoke* and others; as well as the critically acclaimed television series, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Also, GKIDS is the founder and host of ANIMATION IS FILM, the annual LA-based film festival which embraces the highest aspirations of animation as a cinematic art form, and is a vocal advocate for filmmakers who push the boundaries of the medium to its fullest range of artistic expressions.

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