

FILM

Tokyo International Film Festival sees welcome uptick in crowds



Bekir Bulbul's touching road movie "Cloves & Carnations" had its world premiere at this year's Tokyo International Film Festival. | © FILMCODE

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Nov 5, 2022

In the run-up to this year's Tokyo International Film Festival (TIFF), which wrapped on Wednesday, there was a reassuring sense that things were getting back to normal.

As in pre-pandemic times, securing tickets for the buzziest films seemed to require some kind of sorcery. With international travel resumed, there were the familiar mutterings about how South Korea's [Busan International Film Festival](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2022/10/21/films/busan-international-film-festival/) (https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2022/10/21/films/busan-international-film-festival/) — held a few weeks earlier — was much sexier than its Japanese counterpart.

Judged on its own terms, the 35th edition of TIFF was a success. Audience numbers doubled compared to last year. International guests were back in force, bringing a sense of excitement to post-screening Q&A sessions that Zoom calls simply can't match.

Even the weather was good: After getting off to a frigid start, the event basked in an Indian summer so glorious, it seemed a shame to be spending so much time indoors.

This was never an issue when the festival was held in Roppongi, where screenings felt like an opportunity to escape the seediness of the surrounding neighborhood's nightclubs and bars. Since relocating to the Hibiya, Yurakucho and Ginza areas, TIFF now takes place in one of the most picturesque stretches of central Tokyo.

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For correspondents, this can prove a test of willpower: Do you squeeze in an extra screening, or go for a stroll around Hibiya Park? It's certainly a more pleasant experience, while an open-air screen outside the Tokyo Hibiya Midtown building ensures that TIFF is more visible than when it was sequestered at its former home in Roppongi Hills.

The festival's move doesn't seem to be working out quite so well for its smaller-scale counterpart, Tokyo Filmex, which has long been based in Yurakucho. Originally held a month apart, the events made the decision to coordinate their schedules in 2020, in what was hoped to become a symbiotic relationship. Judging from the bare-bones lineup at this year's Filmex, it's starting to look like a rethink may be in order. With Filmex's former program director, Shozo Ichiyama, now in charge of the overall lineup at TIFF, there's also less of a clear-cut distinction between the two events.

The warm, whimsical fare that used to feature regularly in the main Competition at TIFF during the tenure of Ichiyama's predecessor, Yoshi Yatabe, has been less in evidence over the past couple of years. There was the odd exception this year, notably Milcho Manchevski's bawdy satire, "Kaymak," though a sober mood prevailed.

Just before the lights went down at a screening of Roberta Torre's ramshackle transgender romp, "The Fabulous Ones," I overheard one of the jury members sigh: "I hope it's a comedy." (It was, just not a particularly good one.)

This year's Competition was also notable for the absence of English-language films — which I doubt was deliberate, but was something to smile about.

The gender parity pledge that TIFF signed last year, to much fanfare, was evident in the makeup of the Competition jury, headed by stage and film director Julie Taymor. However, only three of the 15 films in contention were by female directors, suggesting that there's still a way to go — not just for TIFF, but for the industry at large.

Rodrigo Sorogoyen's "The Beasts" ended up taking home the top Tokyo Grand Prix, as well as the awards for best director and best actor (for the remarkable Denis Menochet). A slow-burning but intense drama about the escalating feud between a French couple and their less affluent neighbors in a rural Spanish community, it was a riveting piece of cinema with plenty to say about culture, class, language and the elusive nature of justice.

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Still, it was hard not to feel sorry for some of the films that missed out on prizes, especially those that might have benefitted from the (admittedly negligible) publicity boost that a win at the festival can bring.

The runner-up special jury prize went to Houman Seyyedi's provocative and bleakly funny "World War III," in which a homeless man finds himself playing Adolf Hitler in a movie.

I can't say I shared the jury's enthusiasm for Sanjeewa Pushpakumara's baby trafficking drama, "Peacock Lament," which won the award for best artistic contribution but struck me as awfully stilted. However, the director's gracious acceptance speech confirmed that his heart — like the film's — was in the right place.

There was no arguing with the decision to give the best actress prize to Aline Kuppenheim, whose portrayal of a wealthy woman discovering the dark side of Augusto Pinochet-era Chile was the highlight of Manuela Martelli's otherwise middling "1976."

I'd been holding out hope that the jury would recognize Sawako Agawa for her sublime work in Daishi Matsunaga's "Egoist." The film also featured what might be a career-best performance by Ryohei Suzuki as a gay fashion editor who becomes romantically — and financially — entangled with his personal trainer.



(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/np_file_191968.jpeg).

Ryohei Suzuki gives a strong performance as a gay fashion editor in Daishi Matsunaga's 'Egoist.' | © MAKOTO TAKAYAMA, SHOGAKUKAN © TOKYOTHEATRES CO., INC., NIKKATSU CORPORATION, RIGHTS CUBE INC., ROBOT COMMUNICATIONS INC.

Indie cinema stalwart Rikiya Imaizumi, who's something of a TIFF veteran at this point, finally took home a prize for his shaggy but likable romantic drama, "By the Window," which picked up the festival's Audience Award.

The other Japanese Competition entry, Takeshi Fukunaga's "Mountain Woman," was a distinctive but flawed period drama that didn't quite capture the magic of the director's previous film, "[Ainu Mosir](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2020/10/21/films/film-reviews/ainu-mosir-takeshi-fukunaga/)." (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2020/10/21/films/film-reviews/ainu-mosir-takeshi-fukunaga/>).

Mohammadreza Vatandoust's "Butterflies Live Only One Day" won best picture in the Asian Future section, devoted to up-and-coming directors. It was a genuinely auteur work, and in his acceptance speech, Vatandoust thanked TIFF for providing a home for arthouse cinema at a time when many festivals are leaning toward more populist fare.

I'd been rooting for Bekir Bulbul's "Cloves & Carnations," a deeply felt road movie about an elderly refugee trekking across Anatolia with his granddaughter and a coffin containing his wife's body. It was a story rooted in contemporary concerns but told with the purity of an ancient fable. More than one film at TIFF sent me to sleep, but this was the only one that made me cry.

KEYWORDS

JAPANESE FILM ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/JAPANESE-FILM/](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/japanese-film/)), TIFF ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/TIFF/](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/tiff/))