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SATURDAY-SUNDAY, JANUARY 13-14, 2007

The Asahi Shimbun

Japan's Leading National Newspaper English Edition

The New York Times

WEEKLY REVIEW

By subscription only.
Toll-free 0120-454-571
www.asahi.com/information/english

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Iyoko Murakata leads tourists at Housan Rishshakuji temple.

50 YEARS ON THE JOB

1,015 steps closer to heaven

By TETSUO TERASHIMI
The Asahi Shimbun

One afternoon in late fall, a group of middle-aged and elderly people, all part of the same company tour, gathered to ascend the 1,015 steps that lead up to the highest point in the hilly compound of Housan Rishshakuji temple in Yamagata, the capital of Yamagata Prefecture in southern Tohoku.

Looking up the steep mountain before them, one climber wondered aloud, "Are we going to be OK?"

It was not an idle question: The leader of the group was wrinkled-faced old woman with a hunched back, not much taller than 150 cm.

The temple was featured in a TV commercial for cell-phones that ran last fall. Iyoko Murakata, 83, is the temple's best-known guide. She has been guiding visitors up these steps for half a century.

The usual route involves viewing the outdoor Buddhist statues and small alters that are dotted along the mountain, some carved into the rocks and cliffs.

It finishes with a climb up the 1,015 stone steps along a route that ends at the temple's Oku-no-In hall.

"Okay, here we go!" Murakata calls out, and she starts up the stone steps, her cane in hand. She places each foot carefully as she moves up the mountain.

"Wow, it's hard to keep up," one group member says after a few moments. Hearing the comment, Murakata stops, smiles and turns to wave on the stragglers.

"The path grows very narrow from here on. No matter how close you are to your friends, please walk separately on your own," she warns.

Murakata has a voice as strong as her feet. Her laughter echoes through these mountains where the 17th-century poet Matsuo Basho wrote his famous haiku about cicadas chirping into the silence and the rocks:

*In the silent
of a temple,
A cicada's voice alone
Penetrates the rocks*

Murakata was born and raised near this temple. After she worked at companies in Nagoya and Yamagata, her life grew complicated. She divorced when her only son was 3 years old.

Working as a hostess was not an option. "I knew I wouldn't be able to do that job with my (young) son. I didn't know what to do."

But with the help of local connections, she began her career on the paths of the temple.

Ever since that time, she has been taking a train to this temple from her home in Yamagata six days a week. She only misses a visit when it snows too heavily to make the climb.

During the hike, Murakata and her group reach the spot where Basho wrote his cicada poem. Nearby, stores sell soft drinks.

As the group reaches a spot just a few steps below their destination, they all look very tired. "We're almost there!" Murakata shouts in encouragement.

The higher they had climbed, the more fatigued the group became. After they reach the top, they all congratulate one another on their endurance.

"While Granny was telling us those funny stories, we managed to climb all the way up here," a group member says.

The number of stone steps here is equal to the number of stairs to the top of Mori Tower at Roppongi Hills in Tokyo's Minato Ward. On this day, Murakata made two round trips.

Filmmaker hopes for happy end to sad tale

'... and I came back to this belief that she is really alive and hopefully she will come back.'

MEGUMI YOKOTA

By MARIE DOEZEMA
Staff Writer

For Dutch filmmaker Mirjam van Veeelen, truth and fiction are not so different. While this makes for an interesting artistic approach, it didn't make finding funding for her "poetic documentary" of Megumi Yokota an easy task.

"People expect a documentary to be a documentary, so I had to convince people all the time that it could be done this way, and that was quite a difficult thing," van Veeelen, 46, says.

The film, "Until They Took Her Away," is roughly 80 percent fact and 20 percent fiction. It tells the story of the kidnapping of 15-year-old Megumi Yokota by North Korean agents in 1977. Because so much of the story remains unknown, including whether Megumi is dead or alive, it makes sense to incorporate fantasy with realism, van Veeelen says.

"I don't see the border, or that there is such a big difference between realism and what is playing in your head. We all know this," she says. "I think I can make a film much more intense by combining them. There might be people who have a problem with it, and it was even difficult to get financed because of that."

After shooting in Japan last fall, van Veeelen is in the process of editing her film scheduled for completion this summer and intended for release in both Japan and abroad.

The inspiration for the project came in 2002 when van Veeelen read a newspaper article about Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang regarding the disappearance of Megumi Yokota and other abductees.

"I cut it out because I was kind of puzzled and touched. At the end of a couple of months later I started seriously to think about it and I decided the only way to find out was to go, so I took a plane and came to Japan (in 2003) to meet the parents and go to Niigata to the place where she disappeared," she says. "I met the parents, and it seemed they didn't believe that she had died. That was so interesting to me, and actually the hope of the parents influenced me, because I think it's only the parents who can actually feel if their child is alive or not."

In this way, van Veeelen's film is a portrayal of the faith that Megumi's parents, Shigeru and Sakie, have maintained over the decades since their daughter disappeared. "Hope and longing is something you actually can't get a hold of in life but we all know it's there. So in the film, because I can create energies, I try to visualize this feeling of hope," she says.

"There is a lot of longing in it (the film) and people are also able to say goodbye," she adds, referring to a scene in which the 85-year-old former head of Megumi's school is interviewed.

Van Veeelen's attempt to capture intangibles gives the film a dreamy feeling, she says, and is typical of her work. "What I like to do is combine different styles, so it's never only feature or only animation or only documentary. I like to combine different styles and make a new style out of them, which is supposed to be my personal style."



Mirjam van Veeelen



MIRJAM VAN VEELEN
Filmmaker



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MIRJAM VAN VEELEN
Above: Sound operator Rik Meijer records the footsteps of the actress playing Megumi Yokota; left: Brothers Takuya and Tetsuya Yokota are interviewed.

To date, van Veeelen has completed four films: "The River Okkerivl," an animated feature based on a Russian novel by Tatyana Tolstaya; "Aidatili," an experimental poetic documentary on Moscow performance artist Garik Kolomeichuk; "Beautiful Mali," a portrait of a Dutch woman's nongovernmental work in West Africa; and "The Leap," based on a work by Chinese-French composer Chen Qiang.

"I like the audience to see their brains. I think specifically with documentaries people want to understand everything very easily, like a history lesson. I don't like to work that way."

Because the Megumi film is a blend of fact and fiction, of history and imagination, it has become a very personal project—not just a story of Megumi and her family, but also of van Veeelen's own hope for Megumi's return. To this end, van Veeelen uses a Dutch actress to represent herself in the film.

Van Veeelen's first trip to Japan to meet the Yokotas was followed by another visit in 2004. Most recently, she came in October and November for filming in Niigata and Tokyo.

Van Veeelen is producing the film with the help of Tokyo-based production company

100 Meter Films led by British filmmaker John Williams. "If they weren't there we couldn't have realized the film. They were the only Japanese production company who actually dared to step into the project, and that saved the project," she says.

The Yokotas' story has gained international attention, in part due to other films such as "Abduction: The Megumi Yokota Story," directed by Canadians Chris Sheridan and Patty Kim, released in Japan in November.

"When I heard about it last year I was quite shocked because I had been working so long, and my longing was great to make the film. I thought, 'Well, it's already made,' but then I kept on working on it the way I wanted to make it. I think it's quite specific, so I stopped being afraid and continued."

After seeing "Abduction," van Veeelen is reassured about her own efforts, though she does consider the Canadian production to be "very well made" and realistic. "My film is totally different," she says, adding that she hopes the films can be complementary rather than redundant.

From the beginning in 2003, the Yokotas have supported van Veeelen and her project. "The very first time I met the parents I was

actually a bit nervous because I didn't know what to expect," she says.

"I didn't know what I could ask and if they could talk about it, but they were so open and they were so lively and warm and they are very intelligent. That was a relief, but also a surprise to see what a human being can endure. It's amazing—you think you cannot go on, and then you see the parents and they go on and they work seven days a week. You would never think they're in their 70s. They have a schedule like people in their 20s. They work from morning to late in the evening and there's never a moment of rest."

It's obvious that the Yokotas' strength comes from love, van Veeelen says, and this is what she hopes to portray in her film. "They do it for Megumi. It's the incredible love of parents for their child," she says. "Their personal problem became a national problem and now it's an international problem, but that's due to the fact that they work so hard on it, and they get energy because they hope so much Megumi will come back. That's amazing to see and to watch, and you really hope the outcome will be like that."

Along the way, van Veeelen has come to share the faith of the Yokotas that their daughter is still alive. It hasn't always been easy, especially during times when all evidence has seemed to point to the contrary. "Sometimes it's difficult to hope. I was in Holland, for instance, when the parents got (what Pyongyang claimed to be) the ashes of Megumi. And I thought, 'I really hope it's not hers, let it not be hers.' (At times like that) realism is coming into your story of hope, and it's interfering. And then of course I was very happy that they were not hers, and I came back to this belief that she is really alive and hopefully she will come back."

Van Veeelen can't help but wonder what Megumi would think of the film if she ever has the opportunity to see it. "I want to say that hope and longing—the things you cannot really catch in life—are stronger than realism. Because I hope Megumi is really coming back."

BLOOD, SWEAT AND TEARS

Wannabe Martha Stewart gives personal cooking class; averts disaster

By MARIE DOEZEMA
Staff Writer

It was something of a fluke that I was asked to teach a cooking class, but I fit the main qualification, which was to be a U.S. citizen. The group that asked me is a Tokyo cooking club that features a different cuisine from around the world each month. Ticked at the offer, I immediately said yes, feeling like I was performing a patriotic duty. Watch out, Martha Stewart.

The theme was holiday cooking. My thoughts turned to the insubstantial reputation of American cuisine. Determined to earn my homeland a name beyond Big Macs and Bud Light, I decided on a healthy but festive vegetarian meal: roasted pumpkin with cranberry stuffing, mashed pota-

toes with spinach and dried fruit and apple cobbler.

The day of the class began rather inauspiciously. For some reason it seemed crucial to refill my heater before leaving home, and my haste resulted in a lake of kerosene across the kitchen floor and splatters all over my trousers. I cleaned up as well as I could and rushed to catch the train, reeking of fuel and doing my best to stay away from lit cigarettes.

I arrived at the cooking studio slightly woozy from my own fumes. I introduced myself, explained the philosophical underpinnings of the menu du jour, and we got busy. It dawned on me that perhaps I should have tested the recipes, but there was no time for regret.

I decided to knock the cobbler

out of the way first. I demonstrated how to make the filling and the crust, and everyone got to work. In no time, we were ready to assemble the various parts. The only problem was that there was about three times as much filling as there was crust.

At last, we arrived at equal amounts of filling and dough and put the cobbler into the ovens.

Next up was the main dish. Roasting the pumpkin was easy, but the stuffing was another story. Worried about finishing in time, I began chopping onions like a mad woman. Accustomed to dull knives at home, I sliced into my finger and began spurting blood. I did my best to be subtle, knowing that this would never happen to Martha, and gave the rest of the stuffing instructions with my finger dripping

into a nearby sink.

After excusing myself momentarily, I returned with a wad of rapidly reddening toilet paper. The situation seemed dire, but we persevered through the mashed potatoes. Somehow, things came out OK.

The cranberry stuffing had been met with initial skepticism—raw cranberries are not so tasty, after all—but came out tangy and yummy, the perfect counterpart to sweet pumpkin. The copious amounts of butter we added to the mashed potatoes—the one unsalutary detail of the meal—ensured their deliciousness. And the cobbler? A big hit, with plenty of leftovers.

All in all, I considered it a reasonable debut. I still had all 10 digits and nothing had caught on fire.



The Verdict
Fun ▲▲▲▲
Edibility ▲▲▲▲▲
Danger ▲▲

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Move over turkey, Mr. Pumpkin's in town.