

# A Sense of Home

**Naomi Kawase**, who lives in Nara Prefecture, is one of the leading film directors in Japan. In 1997, she became the youngest-ever (27) director to win the Camera d'Or (best new director) at the Cannes Film Festival with the film *Suzaku*, and in 2007, she won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival for *The Mourning Forest*. *Hanezu*, which was invited to compete in the 2011 Cannes Film Festival, has also been praised for "its brilliant depiction of the perils of life and the fusion of nature and people." After the official screening at Cannes, the film won a five-minute standing ovation from the audience filling the 2,300 seats at the screening venue. The Japan Journal's Osamu Sawaji talks to Kawase.

## Why did you want to become a film director?

**Naomi Kawase:** In the summer of my third year in high school, I was terribly confused about my career after graduation. I had been playing basketball since junior high school, and I had the option of entering a sports university, but I hesitated when I thought about how long you can continue playing basketball.

After a lot of anguish, I was put on the spot for a career, and I thought that I would like to have a job where I can create things together with my colleagues. Somehow that turned into directing films. But I didn't dream of becoming a director from the beginning; it all started with the idea that I would like to work in television. Then, after graduating from high school, I started studying filmmaking at a technical school in Osaka. Ever since using an 8 mm camera to film the city for my first class, I have been completely absorbed by looking at the world through a camera.

## What did you do after graduating from the school?

I didn't think I had any talent, so I worked for a film company making karaoke videos. However, I started to think I wanted to make films



Still from the movie *Hanezu*, starring actress Hako Ohshima. The movie title is an old Japanese word for a certain shade of red, as seen in the fabric pictured.

and in 1992, when I was twenty-three and teaching at the technical school where I had graduated, I made a film called *Ni Tsutsumarete*. It was a documentary about making a journey to look for my father whom I had never met. Then, after that, I made a documentary called *Kata-tsumori* that pieced together life with my foster mother. Both these films won awards at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival and have been screened around the world. I think winning this acclaim motivated me to make *Suzaku*.

**You make many films that are set in Nara including *Suzaku* and your latest film, *Hanezu*. Why is that?**

It's not only because Nara is where I was born and raised, but also because it is a place with a long history of people and an abundance of nature. Through my films, I want to tell people that human beings are connected to the people of ancient times, and also that we are a part of nature.

Fujiwara-kyo, which is Japan's oldest capital in Japan, was built about 1,300 years ago at Nara. The excavation site is featured in *Hanezu*, and, in a sense, Nara is the origin of the Japanese nation. There are also rituals that have continued uninterrupted for hundreds of years such as the Omizutori at Todai-ji temple or the On-matsuri at Kasuga-jinja shrine.

At the moment, I am also producing a video series called *Utsukushiki Nippon: Nara Prefecture* for distribution over the Internet. In Totsukawa Village, which I introduce in the film, people coexist happily with the natural world. Even today, the people live off the bounty of

Naomi Kawase



nature including river fish, mountain vegetables, or wild boar and deer. The

spirit of helping each other is also very strong among the villagers.

I am the executive director of the Nara International Film Festival, which started in 2010, because I want people in Japan and overseas to understand the wonders of Nara. At the second festival in September this year, we will open with the screening of a film shot in Totsukawa village in Nara by a young Mexican director.

**After the Great East Japan Earthquake, you appealed to directors around the world to make “3.11 A Sense of Home Films.” Please tell us about your reasons.**

Many people lost their homes and towns in the Great East Japan Earthquake. When I was thinking about doing something through film, I had the idea of asking directors around the world to participate in making a film that would cast a new light on their homes and towns. Directors overseas reacted to the tragedy that occurred in Japan as if it had happened to them, and submitted works. Victor Erice, the great Spanish director, contributed the phrase “The Planet Earth is the home of human kind” with his work. I was really happy when the evacuees from the Great East Japan Earthquake thanked us after seeing the film.

