

The unexpected awaits at Media Arts Festival

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When asked to describe his latest film in one word, director Shunichiro Miki repeated what most cinema critics worldwide had said after their own somewhat botched attempts to describe it: "Indescribable."

And after making its global debut at the Hawaii International Film Festival in 2011, "Asatte no Mori (The Warped Forest)" is likely to leave its audience similarly mystified at the upcoming Japan Media Arts Festival (JMAF) in Tokyo, too.

Miki, 45, says he rarely thought about audience reaction while making this completely self-funded film. Instead he stuck with his own gut. Of course, that didn't mean he wasn't inundated with constant worry about his career.

"The whole time I was working on it," he says, "I kept asking myself, 'Am I really heading in the right direction?'"

The direction he took was to set the "The Warped Forest," classified as a sci-fi flick, in a quiet village where people of different sizes co-exist. It's unconventional to say the least, and Miki himself admits, "there is no solid message" that he wants to convey. Instead, "The Warped Forest" is meant to titillate its viewers' artistic tendencies.

Organizers at JMAF point out that the enigmatic film "denies its audience any easy understanding" of its plot, and defined it as the exact opposite of what is shown in mainstream cinema, which aims to be easily understood and not a challenge for its audience.

This kind of incomprehensibility is what Miki seems to be an expert in. "The Warped Forest" is filled with scenes of what he describes as sheer ridiculousness — such as one where a giant woman talks with her disproportionately diminutive friend over a cup of tea, all the while struggling to bring her pint-sized cup up to her mouth. Miki depicts such scenes in a unusually matter-of-fact fashion, careful that no sign should escape from his characters that they are conscious of their own absurdity.

"So the whole thing doesn't work if the guy said (to the big woman), 'Why the hell do you have such a small coffee cup?'" What I want is to let them converse with each other so normally that the audience will gradually be tricked into thinking, despite all the weirdness, that such a situation

might not be so weird after all," he says.

Another recurring theme running through Miki's works is an obsession with human corporeality, which comes from a long-standing admiration for Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg. Miki says that ever since he watched Cronenberg's 1983 film "Videodrome," he has fetishized the idea of "an unimaginable combination" that has more often than not had him gravitate toward images using organs and body parts. In "The Warped Forest" he revisits this notion, this time mixing in some fruit. The result is the character of a naked woman who grows some pearlike fruit out of her lower body, with a shape that slightly resembles female genitalia.

Often emblematic of the grotesque, the sight of human organs can end up merely nauseating viewers if shown with no consideration for aesthetic pleasures.

"I'm extremely picky when it comes to guaranteeing the quality of visuals, and securing an excellent team of staff to realize that," Miki says. "So we're not just making gross films, they have a high-standard of aestheticism. ... The audience will be confused as to whether they are looking at something gross or something beautiful."

Colorful, humorous and inherently random, Miki's "The Warped Forest" is indeed rather "indescribable." However, it's this lack of consistencies that is exactly what the festival as a whole seems to embody. Out of 3,503 nominated pieces, a hodgepodge of 120 multimedia artworks — domestic and foreign — will be on show in the disciplines of film, art, animation and cutting-edge gadgetry.

"We're now living in this age when every artist is pretty much free to engage in whatever artistic activity they are interested in, and pursue their individuality," says Akira Tatehata, president of Kyoto City University of Arts, one of the event's key organizers. "So you can expect a broad array of works on display at the festival."

JMAF is split into four divisions: art, entertainment, animation and manga.

This year, the grand-prize winner for the art division was the duo Cod.Act, made up of André and Michel Décosterd. The Swiss brothers said that having a father who was an electrical engineer helped them to develop an interest in technology at an early age.

"We used to love to go and visit his lab and mess around and build things," André

tells The Japan Times. "For us it soon became obvious that our artistic language would be influenced by technology."

As the brothers grew up they began to pursue different areas of interest, with André, 45, becoming a musician and composer, and Michel, 43, going into architecture. But their common fascination with engineering has never waned. As so-called plasticians, or artists involved with the plastic arts, they have collaborated as a unit since 1999 to create complex gadgets and contraptions by taking advantage of their respective specialties.

This synergy culminated in the completion of their latest project, titled "Pendulum Choir," which JMAF organizers describe as a potential forerunner to the next form of artistic activity humanity may be capable of. The project consists of nine opera singers clad uniformly in black and attached to separate hydraulic jacks. A machine moves the singers around in a dozen different directions, even tilting them at awkward angles. André and Michel approached the Jeune Opera Compagnie, one of the best known soloist choirs in Switzerland, to be a part of the piece.

As the choir murmurs, bellows, sings and even occasionally falls silent, André says they are trying to symbolize different states of a breathing organ such as a lung. Each singer represents an alveolus, and as the choir starts its performance with rigorous gravitas, it then works itself up into an unbridled excitement, but here and there it grinds to a halt in an apparent display of organ failure.

The initial idea was to subject the performers to an unprecedented state of physical constraint in the hopes that they would "achieve new or surprising tonal effects," according to André. But as it turns out, the singers the duo selected were so well trained that they were able to withstand those gravitational pressures. So, despite their original expectations, it compromised their vocal delivery very little.

That doesn't mean the brothers experienced no real problems, though. As they went ahead with the project, they faced unexpected difficulties such as the danger of singers colliding with each other, the need to overcome the absence of a conductor, and coordinating the harmony as the performers were in constant motion and couldn't see each other that well.

"The idea behind 'Pendulum Choir' was

