**CHEERS FROM HEAVEN**

**天國からのエール (Tengoku kara no eru)**

2011/114min/Colour/English Subtitles

Distributor: Asmik Ace

Director: Makoto Kumazawa (熊澤賢人)

Starring: Nanami Sakuraba (桜庭ななみ), Hiroshi Abe (阿部寛), Keita Tanaka (田中啓太)

ICA screening information:

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Film Title</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fri 5 Feb</td>
<td>Miss Hokusai</td>
<td>6.30pm</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Being Good</td>
<td>8.30pm</td>
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<td>Sat 6 Feb</td>
<td>Cheers from Heaven</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I’ll Give It My All... Tomorrow</td>
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<td>The Cowards Who Looked to the Sky</td>
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<td>A Farewell to Jinu</td>
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<td>Sun 7 Feb</td>
<td>Noriben - The Recipe for Fortune</td>
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<td>Anthem of the Heart</td>
<td>3.05pm</td>
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<td>The Letter</td>
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<td></td>
<td>A Japanese Tragedy</td>
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<td>Tue 9 Feb</td>
<td>Uzumasa Limelight</td>
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<td>The Cowards Who Looked to the Sky</td>
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<td>Wed 10 Feb</td>
<td>The Elegant Life of Mr Everyman</td>
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<td>Thu 11 Feb</td>
<td>Pecoros' Mother and Her Days</td>
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<td>Tale of a Butcher Shop</td>
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**Dates & Venues:**

- 5 – 11 February
  - ICA, London
- 6 February – 26 March
  - Phoenix, Leicester
- 8 – 27 February
  - Watershed, Bristol
- 8 February – 21 March
  - mac birmingham, Birmingham
- 12 – 14 February
  - QUAD, Derby
- 14 – 29 February
  - Showroom Cinema, Sheffield
- 19 – 24 February
  - Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Aberystwyth
- 20 – 28 February
  - Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee
- 22 – 28 February
  - Filmhouse, Edinburgh
- 25 February – 24 March
  - The Brewery Arts Centre, Kendal
- 2 – 23 March
  - Exeter Phoenix, Exeter
- 18 – 24 March
  - Broadway, Nottingham
- 20 – 24 March
  - HOME, Manchester

*Screening dates vary

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**Filmgoers sometimes react with disgust when encountering a tagline ‘based on a true story,’ especially if the film concerns terminal illness. What might normally be expected from such a film is a mawkish melodrama only loosely attached to reality. Although, at first glance, Cheers from Heaven (2011) might be dismissed as one such tearjerker, the directorial debut of Toho-employed Makoto Kumazawa is not about the exploitation of illness. Quite the contrary, the film introduces to the audience an Okinawan individual whose life and legacy have unexpected value.

Hikaru Nakasone was born in 1967 in Okinawa, the principal island of Japan’s southernmost chain of subtropical islands. After having worked in Tokyo for ten years, he returned to his hometown, Motobu, in the mid-1990s to become a lunchbox vendor. He decided to build a music studio beneath his bento shop, opening it for free to the students of a nearby high school, but kidney cancer took his life prematurely in 2009, when he was only 42. In the film, it is suggested that the protagonist had returned to his hometown after his first cancer surgery in Tokyo, implying that his altruistic decision to create his studio, named Ajsai Onkaku Mura (Hydrangea Music Village), had been in some way influenced by his awareness of mortality and the threat of potential relapse. In real life, however, it was his mother’s deteriorating health that brought Nakasone back to Okinawa and he did not succumb to cancer until 2005, seven years after establishment of his studio.

Unlike in Akira Kurosawa’s *Ikiru* (1952), the motivation for Nakasone was not his critical illness, but was rather his determination to bring back to his hometown a sense of family-based community.

In Okinawa, communities were traditionally based on trust and mutual support known as *yuimaru*, and raising youngsters was a shared responsibility. It was not uncommon for Okinawans to treat any child in their village as their own and to discipline the child when necessary. For Nakasone, Ajsai Onkaku Mura was as much a dream factory for aspiring young musicians as it was a place where youngsters could acquire what he thought should be fundamentals for living as humans—compassion, courtesy, respect for others, and so on. Nakasone’s willingness to serve as a *nini* (Okinawan word for ‘big brother’) for local high schoolers derives from his fatherless background and the memory of formative influences people in his own hometown had on him. Throughout the film, the absence of fathers, both of Hikaru’s as well as of other characters’, is prominent in foregrounding the protagonist’s role as a substitute father.

Musicians who made their debut from Nakasone’s music studio could provide a fresh addition to Okinawa’s vibrant and diverse music culture, consisting of traditional Ryukyuan music, American rock imported during the 27 years of postwar US military occupation, Latin American rhythms brought back by the descendants of...
...Okinawan emigrants, and the currently dominant Japanese music. Having spent his boyhood in the wake of the reversion of Okinawa’s sovereignty to Japan in 1972, Nakasone was part of the generation who had been exposed to the inundation of Japanese pop music. Although he himself did not share a keen interest in music, Nakasone had a childhood friend who dreamed of becoming a professional rock musician but was then killed in his youth in a motorcycle accident. Having seen his best friend’s devotion to music, Nakasone envisioned music as tantamount to youthful passions and hope, which he found in the young musicians he supported. Shot entirely in Okinawa, the film features many of the island’s iconic music venues, including Koza Music Town—a performance hall built in the nightlife area frequented by American soldiers from the nearby Kadena Air Base—and Mihama American Village, a reclaimed seaside district and current mecca for local street musicians, developed in the late 1990s on a former base site.

Japanese films set in Okinawa tend to glamourise the exotic features of the islands. Whether in Sonatine (Takeshi Kitano, 1993) or All About Lily Chou-Chou (Shunji Iwai, 2001), the focus is often on the visitors who find temporary escape and comfort in the subtropical natural beauty, while the local life and history are marginalised. Cheers from Heaven can be seen as a pleasurable exception, depicting a local hero and his contribution to Okinawa’s music scene, which would have otherwise remained unknown outside the islands. Premiered in March 2011, only a couple of weeks after the Tohoku Earthquake, the film also provided an uplifting cheer and encouragement for the disaster-stricken mainland Japanese audience.

Text by Kosuke Fujiki, King's College London