

Millennium Actress

Sennen Joyū, 2001, Japan

Film Overview



Millennium Actress recounts the legend of an actress named Chiyoko Fujiwara who mysteriously disappeared during her greatest moment of fame. Via a sweeping backdrop of historical and fictional events that breathlessly span time, Chiyoko tells her story to a documentary filmmaker named Genya who has tracked the actress down to her remote hideaway. As the story unfolds, Chiyoko's personal history becomes inextricably intertwined with the characters she plays in the movies throughout her long career, all in pursuit of her first love, a political activist painter who left her with a mysterious key that sets the whole story in motion. Along the way Chiyoko's quest is hampered by an older actress and a mysterious scarfaced man. Luckily, Genya and his sardonic cameraman find themselves swept up in the story also, and come to her rescue several times. It all may sound a little odd,

and western audiences not used to anime's occasionally static style may take a few minutes to adjust, but once they do, countless rewards await: brilliant animation, a treasure trove of insight into Japan's history and film industry, and for anyone who's ever loved and lost, an almost assured shedding of many heartfelt tears. *-Adapted from yesasia.com*



Cultural Notes

- **Japanese History** Chiyoko's film roles span many different eras and provide a rough overview of Japanese history from the period of Warring States up through Japanese statism during the Shōwa period.
 - Japan's **Age of Warring States** was a time of social upheaval, political intrigue, and nearly constant military conflict in Japan that lasted roughly from the middle of the 15th century to the beginning of the 17th century.
 - **Edo Period (1615-1868)** During this period, Japan was ruled by the military, with the Tokugawa family, whose leaders assumed the title of *shōgun*, controlling the rest of the country from their capital of Edo (present-day Tokyo). The Tokugawa held sway over 200 high-ranking samurai called *daimyo* ("great lords), who in turn ruled their home domains with a rather high degree of autonomy.
 - The **Meiji period** denotes the period in Japanese history during the 45-year reign of the Meiji Emperor (from 23 October 1868 to 30 July 1912). During this time, Japan began its modernization and rose to world power status.
 - **Statism in Shōwa Japan**, sometimes also referred to as "Japanese right socialism" or "Shōwa Nationalism," refers to a political syncretism of Japanese right-wing political ideologies, developed over a period of time from the late nineteenth century, and dominating Japanese politics during the first part of the Shōwa period. These ideas mixed Japanese nationalism and Japanese militarism ideas with "state socialism," and were proposed by a number of contemporary political philosophers and thinkers in Japan. It is from this government that the artist who Chiyoko meets is trying to escape.
- **Japanese Art and Cinema** The filtering of Chiyoko's life through film history allows the visual style of the film to change suddenly. Some of the scenes are reminiscent of Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, while others evoke Akira Kurosawa movies (particularly *Throne of Blood*). Director Kon has acknowledged the influence of *Throne of Blood*, but says that for the most part there are no specific references in his segments. Instead he drew on a vague general impression of the history of Japanese filmmaking and visual art for his different styles and stories; Kon insists that historical film was actually not a subject he had much familiarity with before he made *Millennium Actress*. He studied the settings and costumes carefully, however, and learned a lot in the making of the film.

