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features

All Smiles

Globetrotting director Atsushi Ogata tries his hand at a romantic comedy... in a country where there are no romantic comedies

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Picture this: you enter a grocery store only to have an old woman tap you on the shoulder wanting to know how long the sale is on. While waiting for your friend in a theater lobby, fellow patrons keep coming over to ask where the restroom is. A bit later, you're mistaken for an attendant and asked to escort a lost child. As you try to help the girl look for her parents, the grandmother confuses you with a kidnapper she's seen in the paper and calls the police.

This chameleon-like ability to blend into one's surroundings is the sort of quality that critics rave about in actors; in real life, though, it might get a bit old. But that pretty much sums up the life of Hiroshi, the main character in director Atsushi Ogata's debut feature *Wakiyaku Monogatari*—and also, to a certain extent, that of his creator.

While Ogata has never actually been arrested for kidnapping, he says that Hiroshi's other experiences are all too familiar. "I go to an office for a meeting, and somebody drags me to another room and is like, 'The Xerox machine is over here.'"

And then there was that little incident on the Swiss-Austrian border. "I was at a filling station and about to get back in the car when this German guy comes up and asks me, 'Do you work here?' And I said, 'Nein.' But he was convinced that I did and he wanted me to fix his rearview mirror. I somehow got into his car, but I didn't want him to kidnap me or anything. So I sort of sat so I could kick the door open if I had to, and I'm trying to fix his mirror, but of course I can't. And my father's looking over like, 'What the hell is he doing in somebody else's car?'"

At this point in our interview, we begin to realize that speaking with Ogata is not unlike running a marathon—after it's all over, it's hard to tell whether you're more exhilarated or exhausted. "You've only got 30 minutes?" a mutual friend asked incredulously when we said we'd be speaking with the director. "That's not going to be long enough. He talks a lot."

Even in English?

"Oh, he talks even faster in English."

With its wacky cast of characters—from an amorous policewoman to a handsome-yet-dim action star—and frequent cases of mistaken identity, *Wakiyaku Monogatari* (English title: *Cast Me If You Can*) plays like a classic Hollywood screwball comedy. Hiroshi



Photo by Sarah Cortina



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