

February's *Review* dealt heavily with the aftermath of the Second World War in East Asia. In this issue, Annabelle Sami reviews a production that brings such issues closer to home. *After Hiroshima* considers the reception in the UK of the news of the atomic bombings and the way in which they were reported in the media. On a similar note, Jenny White, reporting on *Japan Now*, a conference examining contemporary Japanese art and culture, sets the event in the context of the fifth anniversary of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, protests in Britain against the renewing of Trident, and coverage of the reopening of the Takahama Nuclear Plant in Fukui Prefecture.

Among the stellar cast of speakers at *Japan Now* was Shimada Soji, darling of the Japanese crime fiction community, and we are delighted to include a review of his *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders*, recently published in translation by Pushkin Vertigo Press. Shimada writes

*honkaku* mysteries, giving readers the chance to solve the crime before the detective. At the opposite end of the spectrum of Japanese crime writers is Yokoyama Hideo, whose atmospheric and political *Six Four* has been receiving the kind of critical attention one would normally expect of a new Murakami novel. In her review, Charlotte Goff tells us that it more than lives up to the hype.

One might expect the use of a talking dolphin in a satirical critique of consumer culture to risk overplaying things, but Susan Meehan tells us that Suzuki Atsuto's *The Bite* doesn't lack for subtlety or humour.

Lastly, Annabelle Sami revels in Director Tetsuya Nakashima's overblown *Kamikaze Girls*.

As ever, we are extremely grateful to all of our contributors, who give up a considerable amount of time in writing for this publication.

William Upton

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(Image: Fukada Kyoko in *Kamikaze Girls*)

## Six Four

by Yokoyama Hideo, translated  
by Jonathan Lloyd-Davies

Quercus (2016)

640 pages

ISBN 978-1848665255

Review by Charlotte Goff



That the film adaptation of Yokoyama Hideo's *Six Four* is to be released in two parts gives us some idea of its size – 'bulletproof' is one way that I've heard the eighty-one-chapter thriller described. Not trusting cinema-goers' ability to recall the enormous cast and intricate plot, parts one and two will be screened in Japanese cinemas just a month apart. *Six Four* requires commitment. While fiction two-timers and commitment-phobes will likely end up confused and disappointed trying to recall just who was Arakida, and what exactly was his relation to Akama, or Akikawa, the dedicated reader will be rewarded with a plot that is gripping, fast-moving and with a twist which, true to the blurb's promise, 'no reader could predict'.

January 1989 saw Japan move from the Shōwa to the Heisei era, as Crown Prince Akihito succeeded his father as Emperor. It is in the closing days of Shōwa that the novel's first victim, seven-year-old Amamiya Shoko, was kidnapped and killed. The ascension of a new Emperor should have been a cause for celebrations across Japan but it instead underlined the failure of the police force in 'Prefecture D' to find the murderer; national newspapers which rejoiced the new Emperor poured criticism on the bungled investigation in equal measure. Police officers gave the case the code name 'Six Four' – a promise that the killer, despite 'disappearing into Heisei', would be dragged back to account for crimes committed in the sixty-fourth and final year of Shōwa.

Fourteen years have passed since the kidnapping, and Mikami Yoshinobu is surprised to hear the case's secret code name spoken again. Once a detective on the original Six Four team, Mikami has since found himself reassigned as Press Director of the police's Media Relations wing. He spends much time wrangling with his conscience: do his true loyalties lie in the criminal investigations department where he trained, or the administrative department in which he now finds himself? He struggles, too, with the sudden disappearance of his own teenage daughter and the silent phone calls that follow.

Mikami's conflicting loyalties lead him to act part-detective, sniffing around for clues to the mysterious Six Four 'Koda memo' and shadowing his colleague and former kendo club rival Futawatari, while striving to maintain relations with the local reporters. Fighting the police's tight-lipped attitude towards information, an increasingly agitated Press Club begin to question police accountability: if all the case information you give us is anonymous, how can we be sure that 'Person A' even exists?

Almost as absorbing as the plot itself is the window that Yokoyama (who worked as an investigative journalist for 12 years before beginning as a crime writer) opens onto the workings of the Japanese police force. It is overwhelmingly men that populate both the police departments of Yokoyama's fiction and their real-life counterparts; *Six Four* was published in Japanese in 2013, just one year after the National Police Agency's 2012 *White Paper on Crime* pledged to raise the proportion of women in the force from 6.8% to 10% by 2023. We see Mikumo, the one female member of Mikami's staff, struggle to make a meaningful contribution to the department. Much of this world of work takes place outside the office, in bars and karaoke booths, and Mikumo is at one point 'commanded' to stay at home. Following Mikumo's travails, ('She's just here to lighten the mood a little', says one colleague) was one of the book's frustrations and, later, pleasures.

The first of crime writer Yokoyama Hideo's works to be translated into English, *Six Four* is his sixth novel and the second to secure top spot in Japan's 'Kono Mystery ga Sugoi!' annual ranking of the country's best crime fiction. In just six days after its release, over a million Japanese people bought the Japanese original. Not knowing this before reading it, I came to the novel with just two thoughts about it. The first, 'It's huge' remains true. The second, 'This will take a while' was, happily, wrong. It is a testament to Yokoyama's storytelling that (accounts of Shoko's kidnapping aside) a book which uses over 600 pages to recount seven days' events at no point felt slow. The plot and its flawed (and therefore all-the-more-likeable) protagonist gave the book an addictive quality. I could have read more. In the meantime, Japanese speakers can look forward to the film. The less said about the cheesy NHK dramatization the better. §

## Japan Now

British Library,  
27 February 2016

Review by  
Jenny White

*A review of the Japan Now conference organised by Modern Culture with support from the Japan Foundation, Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, the British Library and the Arts Council on Saturday 27 February 2016.*



I came to *Japan Now* with a sense of curiosity and high expectations, and also a little misgiving: how was it possible that today's Japanese society could be reflected in a day of 'contemporary writing, politics and culture'? I was soon to find out...

On this same cloudy day in London, as Britain's biggest anti-nuclear march in a generation was taking place in Trafalgar Square, NHK, Japan's national broadcaster, was reporting the country's latest census figures – a decline in population of nearly one million in the past five years, attributed to a falling birth rate and lack of immigration. Significantly, if not surprisingly, the largest drop, of 115,000 people, was in Fukushima, site of the nuclear power station, hit especially badly by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. While Asian news sources gave plans to reopen the Takahama Nuclear Plant in Japan's Fukui Prefecture prominence, British news was full of reports on Brexit, and in Japan the headlines were of the Tokyo Marathon.

*Japan Now* opened with consummate scene setting in 'State of the Nation', an all-star panel with writer Ian Buruma, journalist Richard Lloyd Parry, and Professor Shimazu Naoko, nimbly chaired by the insightful Christopher Harding who pulled together conflicting view points and provocative audience questions. Shimazu whizzed us through a 'History of post-war Japan in 10 minutes', citing Ozu Yasujiro's 1953 film *Tokyo Story* as epitomising the tensions placed on the family unit, through two decades of growth in the 1960s and 70s, to posit the significance of signposts such as the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the 1970 World expo as triggers for a reassessment of Japan's position on the world stage. Shimazu reminded us that criticism of the World Expo focused on the overshadowing of other significant events that year such as the US-Japan Security Treaty, and the

'mobilisation' of art and artists to serve the nation, a point that could be re-examined in the run-up to the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2020.

Lloyd Parry, one of the first foreign journalists to visit the earthquake area in Tohoku in 2011 noted the survivors' resilience, courage, generosity and decency – 'the best of Japan'. This was also a 'signpost', he said, 'that would seem to point to a way out of the post-bubble era funk of the last 20 years'. These were, he told us, the same qualities that had led to a disengaging of grassroots sentiment and mainstream politics, such self-reliance leading to resignation and low expectations of a broader political system. Harding closed by asking whether the Japanese media was doing enough both to mediate between grassroots and politics as well as to challenge political power.

As the discussion progressed, nationalism versus patriotism in both Britain and Japan emerged as a core theme, in particular with regard to their relationship to sense of self. Buruma suggested that pacifism, as drafted in Article 9 in the Constitution, banning the use of armed force, had polarised history as something imposed from the outside; essentially, the new capitalist system – by which the economy depoliticized the emerging middle class so that they could make profits – failed during time of recession.

Such was the picture as we went into the first writer session, 'Japan in Fiction (i)', contrasting surrealist writer Yoshida Kyoko and her book *Disorientalism* (Vagabond Press), with Hiraide Takashi, poet and writer of best seller *The Guest Cat* (New Directions), brilliantly chaired by experienced writer and Journalist Suzy Feay. Hiraide explained that the 'I-novel', a Japanese term defined as writing only from one's direct experience with no invention, might lead to a writer deliberately seeking out more interesting – and possibly dangerous – experiences. Despite the challenges an 'I-novel' poses to translation (the word 'I' in Japanese can be neutral) *The Guest Cat* is now published in 10 languages. Yoshida's *Disorientalism* is yet to be translated into Japanese.

In this session, the writers discovered that they both came from the southern island of Kyūshū, and discussion focussed on the significance on their writing of living and working 'elsewhere', Yoshida now in Kyoto and Hiraide in Tokyo. Hiraide talked in terms of wanting to find 'his own battlefield', away from his birthplace.

After lunch we entered the dark side in 'Japan in Fiction (ii)', with two quite different crime writers, Nakamura Fuminori and Shimada Soji, chaired by writer

Lesley Downer. We heard the cadences of contrasting styles as the writers read extracts from their books, our partial understanding confirmed by interpreter Bethan Jones. Nakamura's *The Gun* and *The Thief* (both Soho Press) dwelt in the internal landscape of 'what if?' Bestselling crime writer Shimada's seductive mellifluous tones, meanwhile, were clearly designed for audio books; I could have listened entirely in Japanese, which is indeed a compelling option, as only one of his hundred books, *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders* (reviewed below) has been translated into English. Shimada took the opportunity to challenge us to make an English film version!

The final audience question was in some ways the most insightful, advancing a comparison with recent popular Scandinavian crime dramas, yet suggesting that what was not present in this Japanese genre was political intrigue on a larger scale. These instead display an intense and detailed focus on personal politics rather than an amorphous and broader political context. I found this a key point in accounting for the success of this genre in Japan.

By the end of the day, we were truly rewarded with a richly honest and profound account by artist photographer Hatakeyama Naoya, who had suffered family tragedy when his home town of Rikuzentakata was thrust into the spotlight as the epicentre of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011. Hatakeyama added 'personal' to the title of this session ('Surveying

the (personal) Landscape') to highlight the way in which the tragedy had caused him to reconsider the objectivity of his work as a photographer. Hatakeyama gave an example of how this had affected a debate with curators on which of his works should be included in his exhibition *Natural Stories* at the Tokyo Museum of Photography. A discussion chaired by curator Simon Baker further explored notions of personal and social and the fluctuating boundaries in between.

*Japan Now* was a unique and balanced introduction to today's Japan as reflected in literature and art. The writers, Hiraide, Yoshida, Nakamura and Shimada, who went on to make appearances in Bath, Manchester and Leeds were, with the panel chairs, well chosen to reflect disparate genres. Bethan Jones' elegant interpretation reiterated its importance as integral to communicating ideas and in adapting to the flow of the event. I came away thinking that notions of patriotism, nationalism and self-identity were, more than ever, complex themes to be unravelled. I wondered why so little outside Murakami had been translated into English; where does the initiative come from for this to happen? From a Japanese literary agent to champion a writer as representative of the Japanese *zeitgeist*? Or is it events such as *Japan Now* in the UK that can drive interest at a grass roots level, presenting a colour-enhanced picture of a multi-faceted Japan with complex problems, parallel realities, and anxieties similar to our own? §

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## The Tokyo Zodiac Murders

by Shimada Soji

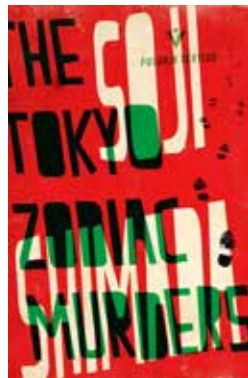
Pushkin Vertigo (2015)

Translated by Ross and Shika Mackenzie

320 pages

ISBN 978-1782271383

Review by Chris Corker



Selected for the new 'Pushkin Vertigo Collection' from Pushkin Press, *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders* marked the debut of established crime writer, Shimada Soji, whose subsequent fame at one time forced him to escape Japan for Los Angeles. While the book was shortlisted for the Edogawa Rampo Award In 1981, Shimada himself was awarded the Japan Mystery Literature Award in 2009 in recognition of his life's work. His detective novels are *Honkaku* – or 'genuine' – mysteries, where emphasis is placed primarily on plotting and

clues in lieu of social commentary or the psychological insights that have become a staple of contemporary crime fiction. In metafictional asides, Shimada even addresses the reader directly, challenging them to solve the mystery before the end of the novel. While well-implemented, this technique can lessen the reader's immersion in the story, the book less of a narrative and more of a puzzle or How to guide. The interplay between the characters becomes a simple sounding-board exercise, leaving the dialogue feeling forced. If puzzle-solving is the reader's main point of enjoyment from a detective novel, however, it should not prove such an obstacle.

In 1930s Tokyo, an eccentric artist is found dead by his seven residing female relations, inside a room that appears to have been locked from the inside. With the body is discovered a note, detailing the deceased's plan to murder his relatives in an occult ritual to create the perfect woman. Soon after the murder, the plan is carried out and the dismembered bodies of the

victims are found in varying locations across Japan. The police have no leads. By 1979, these murders, dubbed 'The Tokyo Zodiac Murders' because of their link to astrology, have been fascinating the nation for forty years. When the mystery-obsessed Ishioka Kazumi approaches his talented astrologist friend, Mitarai Kiyoshi, with a new lead, they set out to solve the crime.

There will be something familiar for all readers in *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders*, despite its unfamiliar (for general British readers) locations. While the locked room mysteries are reminiscent of an episode of *Jonathan Creek*, the relationship of the two protagonists will at once be recognisable as an iteration of the Holmes-Watson dynamic. Perhaps this isn't surprising given that novels and television show alike have used this formula to good effect over the years. The problem here, however, is the lack of evidence provided to back up their supposed traits. The reader is told rather than shown that Ishioka is the well-meaning but less gifted sidekick to Mitarai's troubled genius. Perhaps this is due to the fact that this is Shimada's debut. Ishioka and Mitarai have now appeared together in many novels, gaining cumulative history with each story. In this first instalment, however, this chemistry and depth is lacking.

In the second half of the book, the reader is left alone for stretches with Ishioka. These sections, despite being grounded in a well-realised Kyoto, are the weakest of the book. It is not so much the rapport of the two that is missed – as mentioned, this isn't overly evident anywhere – but rather the obvious futility of all Ishioka's endeavours. The reader is not so clueless as to believe that the sidekick would ever solve the crime – or indeed, that any of his assertions could be of use; that isn't how the Holmes-Watson formula works. The result of all this is that these sections fulfil the role of merely padding out the story, while the reader impatiently awaits the denouement.

One problem in particular that Western audiences may encounter is the sheer number of names with which they are bombarded at the beginning of the book, not being able to rely on any distinctive *kanji* as would a Japanese reader. Paired with the foreignness of the language is the fact that many of the names are similar, almost all the victims' forenames ending in 'Ko'. While true to the reality of Japanese naming conventions, it causes unnecessary confusion in a story that is already purposely intricate and baffling. Indeed, at the end of the exposition, the author tells the reader that they already have sufficient clues to solve the

mystery, but such is the volume of information that it would take a great feat of memory to do so.

The mystery itself is intriguing enough. Shimada does a great job of restricting enough information to keep the reader believing more is needed to solve the crime, despite several asides to the contrary. These asides add levity to a story that is in reality very macabre, and this juxtaposition of tones may not sit well with all readers. The references and descriptions of astrology are also a point that may divide opinion. Deeply involved in the subject himself, Shimada is not sparing with these – indeed they hold considerable relevance to the mystery. Those interested in this field may enjoy this novel far more than sceptics.

The decision as to whether or not this is a worthwhile read will depend heavily on the preference of the reader. If they are happy to forego rapport, put up with hackneyed characters and bear with some clunky dialogue in favour of the cathartic rush of solving a seemingly impenetrable mystery, then *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders* will furnish them perfectly well. Those looking for something narratively adept, and with well-realised and original characters should look elsewhere. §

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## The Bite

by Suzuki Atsuto

Rich Mix, 5 March 2016

Review by Susan Meehan

Yellow Earth theatre company was formed in 1995 with the aim of developing the range of acting opportunities available to British East Asian actors. In March this year, it celebrated 21 years of theatre making with an international play reading festival, Typhoon, at Soho Theatre and Rich Mix in London. The plays were chosen following an open call for proposals, and Suzuki Atsuto's *The Bite* was one of eight selected for a read through by professional actors. Suzuki is currently on a six-month grant from the Japanese government to study British theatre, and following the performance he took part in an audience Q&A.

What to do when the dolphin you are 'keeping' in a fish tank at home 'evolves' – animatedly introducing himself as meat-eating Putin, born in Okinawa to parents from the Sea of Okhotsk? Not only that, Putin is metrosexual as well, and keen to help with the



cooking. A rather astute dolphin, Putin knows that his young owners, the Nekomiyas, are fattening him up with intent.

One day after work, Mrs Nekomiya returns home to find that Putin has managed to climb out of his fish tank. She is overcome by his downright adorability, and by the fact that he can talk. She wonders whether her dolphin-meat consuming husband will be persuaded to keep Putin as a pet.

Deftly flashing back to the Nekomiya's recent honeymoon, the audience is shown insights into their nascent relationship, their foodie interests and their first encounter with dolphins. As the play progresses, is Mr Nekomiya himself starting to smell a little fishy?

Suzuki's farce soon veers its attention from sushi-loving Putin to Mr Inoguchi, a rather weird and distasteful colleague of Mr Nekomiya, sharing with the other characters their obsession with food. Against all odds, Alex Chang who played Mr Inoguchi did manage to make his character strangely endearing.

Suzuki's pacey dialogue captivates throughout, and the Q&A revealed that the audience were keen to read other themes into the text beyond the focus on greed, waste and fads. Among the queries, did Suzuki choose a clever, evolved dolphin to highlight human hypocrisy and arrogance when it comes to eating, and who is to say that it is fine to rear chickens to eat but not dolphins? During the Q&A Suzuki told the audience that he had an epiphany while eating a hamburger at McDonald's – he began to wonder why he was eating the hamburger rather than the other way round.

The play is hilarious, surreal, topical, full of surprises and at times slightly unnerving. It can be enjoyed without having to dwell on its societal critique. The young, talented and striking Yellow Earth actors were compelling and versatile. Although it was billed as a play reading, and despite lack of time for rehearsals, the cast invested their roles with great energy and character. In the Q&A Suzuki – himself used to directing his own plays – expressed surprise at the level of physicality they achieved.

Leo Ashizawa as Putin stole the show, and Susan Hingley was particularly strong in her roles as restaurant manager and menacing caretaker. Franko Figueiredo's direction was tight and spot on; flashbacks were deftly achieved with the actors skilfully going into reverse.

When asked how his work is received in Japan, Suzuki said that it tended to be more popular abroad in countries such as Korea as Japanese audiences prefer realistic plays to hyperbolic or slapstick theatre. When asked about the target audience for this play, Suzuki

said that it is aimed at adults as there is not much youth theatre in Japan. The play was very positively received at Rich Mix and the audience laughed and was responsive throughout – Suzuki's humour clearly travels, and this is perhaps helped by the fact that he has been influenced by international actors including Ray Cooney and Complicite's Simon McBurney. He also mentioned Noda Hideki as an influence, and Noda too has had positive press in the UK.

Commenting on the experience of seeing the play in translation, Suzuki said that some aspects were the same but also acknowledged some differences. He felt that director Figueiredo was decisive and good at listening to the actors' comments, while there is more of a hierarchy in Japan. Suzuki also said that Japanese actors focus less on the text and more on the action, making Japanese plays often seem a bit more like a pantomime.

As observed by one of the audience members, 'The Yellow Earth Company actors gave the play a realistic sense of Asia and Japan and a sense of normality despite the play's intrinsic weirdness.'

It was a delightful, energising eye-popping way to spend a Saturday afternoon. §

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## London Bubble Theatre Company's After Hiroshima: A Post-Event Reflection

Dilston Grove,  
3–11 March 2016

Review by Annabelle Sami

London Bubble Theatre Company, based in Rotherhithe, has formed a close relationship with Hiroshima over the past two years. This began with their intergenerational community theatre project *Grandchildren of Hiroshima*, which was performed in Hiroshima in collaboration with three young Japanese directors in August 2015 to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dropping of the A bomb. *Grandchildren of Hiroshima* was created from the testimonials of *hibakusha* and performed by a cast of children, adults and grandparents. The piece was recently screened at Daiwa Foundation Japan House and is available to watch in full here: <http://bit.ly/1VR77b9>.

A year later, in March 2016, London Bubble performed their latest show, *After Hiroshima*. As a sister piece to *Grandchildren of Hiroshima* it tracked the British





response to the dropping of the atomic bomb and the subsequent rise of pacifist groups in the UK. The show charts how reports of radiation sickness were kept hidden in the UK and how, when this information was uncovered, church leaders, young mothers, and politicians alike gathered together to protest against nuclear weaponry.

At the beginning of *After Hiroshima* British soldiers come across the ruined city, four months after the dropping of the bomb. One soldier recounts the harrowing experience, of the shadows burnt into the ground and of the incessant cremations. From here, the show tracks forward, through the formation of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the Aldermaston March, to the present day, with explorations of what the £100 billion cost of replacing Trident could be used for in the UK instead of nuclear warheads. The entire script is formed of testimonies from people who were involved in these early anti-nuclear protests and their memories of the news of the first atomic bombings.

The show ends with a depiction of real-life protester Takako Barker, who travels to the Japanese embassy in London every week to protest against the revision of Japan's Article 9. A cast member then tells the story of Sasaki Sadako, the 12 year old girl who died from Leukaemia caused by radiation exposure in 1955 after attempting to fold one thousand origami cranes as a way of wishing for good health. As the story is being told the cast bring origami cranes onto the stage – a moving end to the piece.

Crucially, the cast is made up of around 40 volunteer performers from the local community, led by the artistic team at London Bubble. There was also a small team of volunteers, of which I was part, who helped backstage and at rehearsals. Some cast members are Japanese living in London (indeed, one member is from Hiroshima) and some of the cast are London Bubble regulars. Other cast members are involved in the CND or participated in peace protests in their youth. What stood out to me was the

high level of all-round participation and the eagerness of the non-professional cast to play an active role in shaping the show. Their opinions and suggestions were listened to by the artistic team and this produced an overwhelming feeling of shared responsibility for the resulting show. This is something that is obviously important to London Bubble and is cultivated by artistic director Jonathon Petherbridge's methodology. In workshops, performance material is gathered and explored with groups of community volunteers – a process that was also used in *Grandchildren of Hiroshima*, allowing the cast to have a say as to what goes into the show.


Helping to run these rehearsals was Akiba Yorie, a visiting artist from Tokyo and artistic director of Glasio Bluo, a Tokyo-based puppetry company. Akiba also worked on the *Grandchildren of Hiroshima* project, bringing a sense of unity to the two shows. She said of the performance making process,

Although the theatre making process I am experiencing here is very challenging as rehearsal hours are extremely limited, I do enjoy collaborating with other artists and actors as they are open to throw ideas and thoughts around. This kind of collaboration process was rather new to me and I will definitely apply it to my upcoming puppet project, *The Talking Stick*, in Hiroshima next year.

The final image in *After Hiroshima* is that of a British soldier and Takako Barker holding an origami crane together, symbolising the shared responsibility of both countries to maintain peace. I believe it is also an encapsulation of how successful the project was in demonstrating how the arts can be used to strengthen relationships between Japan and the UK. One cast member said,

Having been to Japan, taking part in this play served to deepen my understanding of the trauma experienced by those caught in the aftermaths of the atomic blasts, but also that the tragic events have a legacy of peace and solidarity.

Not only did those involved in the project learn from the experience, with a few teenage members having never heard of Hiroshima before, they gained a new connection to the country, with many members expressing their wish to visit the Peace Memorial Museum. They also learnt about pre-existing connections between Japan and the UK of which many weren't previously aware. Let us hope that more theatre projects can facilitate new links between Japan and the UK in the future.

[www.londonbubble.org.uk/](http://www.londonbubble.org.uk/)  
[www.glasiobluo.info/](http://www.glasiobluo.info/) 

## Kamikaze Girls

Directed by Nakashima Tetsuya

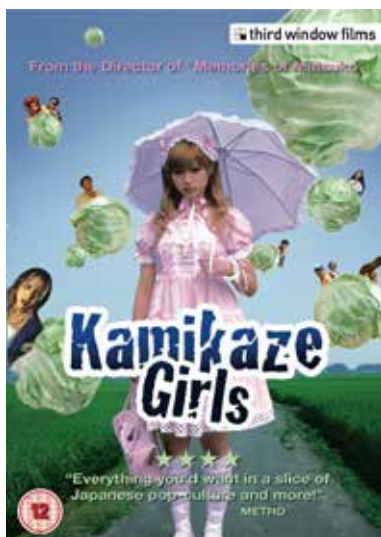
Brick Lane Film Festival  
30 January 2016

Review by Annabelle Sami

This film festival of independent Japanese cinema, run from a small gallery space on Brick Lane, is a great example of how a group of friends can get together and produce a vibrant, successful cultural event. The initial buzz was generated solely through Facebook, the event's page garnering over 12,000 potential attendees. Tickets for the three-day event sold out within days, with extra screenings being added to meet demand – all of which is impressive for an independently-organised event making its debut in London's already saturated events calendar.

The film that I attended was one of the additional screenings added for 10.30am on a Saturday morning. Although an early start for a film, it certainly didn't put off the room full of people eager to see one of the independent films being shown in this varied festival. The venue, 5<sup>th</sup> Base Gallery on Heneage Street, had been decorated with fairy lights, and seating comprised an array of cosy blow-up beds with a few rows of chairs at the back. This simple set up with a projector used to screen the film gave the viewing experience an intimate collegiate atmosphere.

I selected the film I went to see – *Kamikaze Girls*, directed by Nakashima Tetsuya – at random, with no prior knowledge of the director. The film had already been shown a handful of times in the UK at various independently-organised screenings. Originally a 'light novel' written by Novala Takemoto, the film adaptation retains the simple plot – expertly delivered with brilliant performances from Fukada Kyoko and Tsuchiya Anna – in which two teenage girls from



very different teen subcultures meet and strike up an unlikely friendship.


Even people who know little about Japan are aware that the country boasts a startling range of youth subcultures, with vibrant fashion and lifestyle trends flourishing in areas like Harajuku in downtown Tokyo. *Kamikaze Girls* takes two contrasting subcultures – the Lolita and Yanki girls – and situates them to great effect in a rural small-town context.

Lolita girls, especially 'sweet Lolitas', wear dolly styled clothing influenced by Victorian fashion while Yankis belong to high-school all-girl motorcycle gangs, whose signifiers include chain smoking, heavily customised matching uniforms and general delinquency. Despite these stereotypes, both girls show great complexity of character. The Lolita Momoko's (Fukada) sweet dolly aesthetic is undercut by her strange sense of humour and seemingly emotionless persona, while Ichiko (Tsuchiya), a Yanki girl, shows a depth of feeling and tenderness in contrast to the delinquent youth model. But, most importantly, the girls are brave, adventurous and badass – as the overblown motorcycle gang fight scene at the end amply demonstrates. Quite often when it comes to portraying the lives of teenage girls on film, characters tend towards the vapid and one-dimensional, but this is not the case in *Kamikaze Girls*. These girls constantly challenge our perceptions and this makes the film so much more than just an adaptation of a 'light novel.'

The film's comic-book-style warped reality provides a fast paced and entertaining viewing experience and a great backdrop for Fukada and Tsuchiya's comedic performances. A real triumph of independent film, it's easy to see how *Kamikaze Girls* won Best Film at the 2005 Yokohama Film Festival.

*Kamikaze Girls* by Nakashima Tetsuya is available on DVD, published by Third Window Films.

For an interview with Hayashi Kentaro, organiser of the Brick Lane Film Festival, please visit:

[www.japansociety.org.uk/40314/kamikaze-girls/](http://www.japansociety.org.uk/40314/kamikaze-girls/) 

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Please write to [william.upton@japansociety.org.uk](mailto:william.upton@japansociety.org.uk) with examples of your work and information about your knowledge of and interest in Japan.

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