

Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY JESSICA ORECK

DISTRIBUTED BY ARGOT PICTURES

DVD, 90 MINUTES (FULL) AND 56 MINUTES (EDUCATIONAL), COLOR, 2009

Reviewed by David W. Plath

Japan's official state anthem, *Kimigayo*, is about as sing-able as the *Star Spangled Banner*. The tuneful anthem of modern Japanese culture heard endlessly everywhere in the archipelago, is *Hotaru no Hikari*, "Firefly Light," emblem of evanescence, token of passions passing. For most Japanese I know, environmental tragedy is not the waning supply of overpriced, overhyped whale flesh but the decline and fall of Tokyo as a firefly habitat.

Beetle Queen samples Japanese culture's millennium-long affair with select insects. The film challenges our North American impulse to squash first and ask questions later. Are we missing something by not opening our doors to katydids and beetles as household pets? Did Wordsworth and Thoreau, Muir and Leopold seduce us into a vision of nature and wilderness as realms where you don't need *Deep Woods Off?* And, if traffic in warm-blooded vertebrates is immoral, shouldn't People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals activists start fussing about traffic in spineless *coleoptera*? Chitin hearts were harmed in the course of producing this documentary.

A ten-minute clip from *Beetle Queen* could work as a mind-bender about cultural ecology in classes at any grade level, elementary school included, since the most impassioned human-insect intercourse in the film comes in extra-close-up shots of pre-teens. And even attention-deficient students will be caught up in the gluttony of clips of Japanese scenery, though they show Japan through the eyes of a talented videographer, not those of an entomologist or an anthropologist, much less an *Odonata* or a *Lampyrid*.

But ten minutes will suffice to raise the questions; adding the other eighty minutes will be scant help to an entomologically-challenged student grubbing for answers. Scenes of Japanese doing things to insects are shot *verite* style: no context information, few locator shots, no explanation apart from an occasional unscripted comment by somebody caught on camera.

Cityscape and landscape footage is world-class luscious, but its connection with insectophilia is ephemeral. There are moments when images and content click, e.g., at one point when the narrator is reciting poetry about fireflies we are looking at night shots of police directing traffic with luminescent wands. Most of the time, however, the visuals are eye-candy—delicious, addictive eye-candy—but irrelevant to the film's topic.

Ninety minutes of undigested video notes: I might assign them to college students to test their analytic sharpness. I would not assign them to lower level classes until students understand the concept of secondary ethnocentrism. Producer-director Oreck trades American bias about Japanese culture for Japanese bias. Periodically in the film, she jumps from chirping insects to seductive landscape footage paired with the voiceover lilt of a Japanese woman—intoning in dulcet Japanese with English subtitles—what the cultural mavens want their countrymen to believe, which is that Japanese culture has a uniquely unique hotline to nature's sad transience—see those kids petting beetles?!

One difficulty here is explaining the sad fact that by official government reckoning, a third of Japan's once gorgeous coastline has been ruined beyond repair by pollution, petrochemical plants, and atomic generating



Still photo from the film's photo gallery at <http://beetlequeen.com/stillsgallery.html>.

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stations. Another third is listed as endangered. (The film shows us Tokyo Bay only at night and at a distance from the water.)

A second issue Oreck dodges is whether the beetle queen's "conquest" has come about at the expense of the fireflies and may be due as much to shrewd marketing as to cultural conditioning. In the film, the only reappearing character is a Tokyo dealer in *invertebratae* who drives to insect collection sites in a Ferrari bought with his profits from sales.

Oh, and if you haven't already heard it performed, *Hotaru no Hikari* is sung to the tune of *Auld Lang Syne*.

To order this film visit <http://www.beetlequeen.com>. ■

DAVID W. PLATH, Professor Emeritus in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, has been making media programs about Japan since the 1970s. His new film, *Can't Go Native?* (<http://www.cantgonative.com>) is the heartwarming, humorous story of an anthropologist growing old with the people in northeastern Japan he has been studying since 1961.

Editor's note: *Education About Asia* is grateful for our long-standing collaboration with the Asian Educational Media Service (AEMS) at the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign—and for the contribution of AEMS Program Director Nancy Jervis as Guest Editor, who selected the three films reviewed by AEMS in this issue. Although a movie can masquerade as an environmental film, she viewed many to select three she considers the most useful for teaching about environmental issues in Asia. AEMS promotes the understanding of Asian cultures and peoples by assisting educators at all levels to help them find resources for learning and teaching about Asia.