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Berlin Reviews

Posted: Fri., Feb. 10, 2012, 1:00pm PT

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Nuclear Nation

Nuukuria neishon (Japan)

By MAGGIE LEE

A Documentary Japan, Big River Films release and production. (International sales: Wide House, France.) Produced by Yoshiko Hashimoto. Executive producers, Tetsu Maki, Tetsuya Shimizu, Hiroshi Okumura. Directed, edited by Atsushi Funahashi.

With: Katsutaka Idogawa. (Japanese dialogue)

Confronted with a catastrophe of such magnitude as the Fukushima reactor fallout, "Nuclear Nation" cuts to the heart of the matter by focusing firmly on those most gravely affected: evacuees from Futaba, which became ground zero on March 12, 2011. Expressing solemn concern while maintaining a respectful distance from his subjects, helmer-editor Atsushi Funahashi ultimately transcends a lengthy, unpolished and mosaic-like narrative to drive home not only their hardship and fortitude, but the alarming implications of corporate/governmental indifference and ineptitude vis-a-vis Japan's nuclear policies. Accessible, informative docu can expect wide TV/festival play and selective theatrical exposure.



Nuclear Nation

The docu follows the resettlement of 1,415 Futaba residents at the abandoned Kisai High School in Saitama, a suburban city near Tokyo; this took place after their initial evacuation to the capital in the wake of tsunami-triggered hydrogen explosions in the towns' nuclear plants Nos. 1, 2 and 3. After a preliminary survey of makeshift and inhospitable living conditions, the film engagingly focuses on the ordeals of Futaba's mayor, Katsutaka Idogawa, and two families. The Nakais are a father and son who have to live with the inconsolable regret of not having had enough time to search for their missing wife and mother during the hasty retreat. The Yokoyamas are a chatty three-generation family who remain close and pragmatic, despite their periodic separations and permanent uprooting.

Idogawa, whom a reporter tactlessly but aptly calls "a mayor without a town," powers the film in a soft-spoken, unassuming way as he goes through endless lobbying sessions with Tokyo Electric Power Co. management and government officials. Described as having made an "unprecedented decision" by promptly evacuating the whole town, thus saving his people from unimaginable health hazards, he emerges as a man of integrity and drive. Most admirably, he displays enough humility to confess his past misjudgements and try to rectify them, qualities obviously lacking at higher political and corporate levels, as the film unequivocally reveals.

Idogawa's frank and, in retrospect, heartbreaking account traces how the town's rise and fall are inextricably linked with her exploitation by Tepco to become the country's cradle of nuclear power in 1978, a beast of burden serving Tokyo's vociferous demand for energy. News footage and public announcements full of officialese reinforce the notion that nuclear policies showed disregard for human costs from the start.

An attitude of discretion and respect for the film's subjects prevails, even in a wrenching scene in which they are given two hours to return home to pick up their belongings; their facial expressions are unseen, with only their vocal responses recorded. The film's most horrific images show carcasses of cows abandoned to starve under government orders, juxtaposed with a farmer who defiantly feeds a herd, humanely identifying the animals as "survivors."

The approximately 10 months chronicled are conventionally organized by season, interspersed with unintentionally kooky performances intended to cheer up the evacuees. Over a lengthy 145 minutes, the docu's overall structure does suffer a bit from its minute accretion of details and a consistently

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