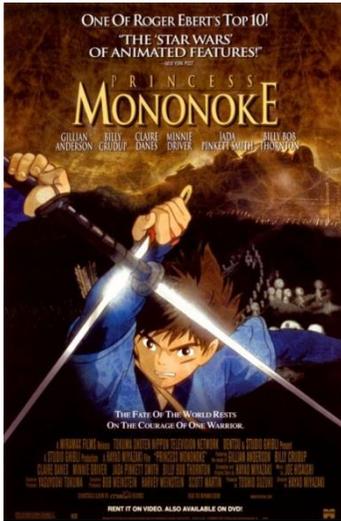


Mark Whelan's Movie Picks

Princess Mononoke (1997) Director: Hayao Miyazaki. 133m Rated: PG-13



Renowned and influential animator Hayao Miyazaki conceived his first Japanese period production with the ecological fable **Princess Mononoke**: an audacious and sophisticated animated feature overflowing with exquisite imagery. Though the film failed to recognize an audience upon its 1999 theatrical release in the United States, it was a box-office sensation back home in Japan.

Set in feudal Japan (the Muromachi era, specifically) throughout a mystical age where forest spirits and humans dwell, young prince Ashitaka is fatally scarred protecting his village from an enraged demon. Knowing he cannot alter his impending doom, the prince exiles himself on a voyage to confront his destiny and discover the source of the demon's wrath.

As Ashitaka ventures west he encounters a prosperous industrial community called "Iron Town" where he befriends the town leader; a fearless woman named Eboshi who, despite warnings from the forest gods, will stop at nothing to preserve her lifestyle and the furtherance of her people—forests be damned.

The intrepid Eboshi purchases brothel women and tasks them tending the bellows of the ironworks. She also accommodates lepers that earn their keep by forging an arsenal to secure the town from samurai and brigands. All the while, a shadowy young woman named San (callously nicknamed "Princess of the beasts" -- the film title's literal translation), raised by Moro the wolf-goddess of the forest, plots Eboshi's assassination.



Miyazaki painstakingly rendered thousands of animation cells personally in order to finalize a concept he initiated in the 1970s. The animator's reoccurring themes of ecology, feminism, and mythology escalate in a majestic scale of wondrous imagination as the story vigorously unfolds while daring to ask challenging inquiries about humankind's place within the natural order.

Princess Mononoke is satisfactorily dubbed in English, but purists will find it apt to experience this outstanding film subtitled.

--Mark Whelan, December 12, 2014