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SAKURA ANDO

Sakura Ando was already a STAR in Japan when she gained international fame with *Shoplifters*, which won the TOP AWARD at CANNES in 2018. The world is knocking on her door, so why is she slowing down for now?



End of Act One

INTERVIEW
KASUMIKO MURAKAMI

PHOTOGRAPHY
TESS AYANO

FASHION
REINA OGAWA CLARKE



HER NAME, Sakura, means cherry blossom, a flower synonymous with Japan. True to her namesake, Sakura Ando's remarkable performances have made her one of the Japanese film industry's most recognizable actors, both at home and on the global stage.

Ando shot to international fame in director Hirokazu Kore-eda's film *Shoplifters*, which won the Palme d'Or at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival. She played Nobuyo, a tough but tender woman living on the fringes of society who nonchalantly accepts a wounded girl, brought to her by her husband, into her family. Ando's performance garnered widespread acclaim, including from Cannes jury president Cate Blanchett, who praised it as "unforgettable." For this role, Ando received the Best Actress award at the Japanese Academy Awards – the second time she'd won that prize, following a win in 2016.

Ando has since appeared in a succession of notable films. She starred in Kei

Ishikawa's psychological drama *A Man*, which received a prolonged standing ovation after its screening at the Venice Film Festival in 2022. The story unfolds after the death of her character's husband, when a postmortem reveals he was completely different from who she thought he was. In the film, Ando simultaneously seeks the truth while concealing her emotions, and she received the Best Supporting Actress award for her performance at the Japanese Academy Awards.

In 2023, she appeared in Kore-eda's critically acclaimed *Monster*, which caused a stir at Cannes for its complexly layered depiction of a young boy engulfed in darkness. Ando portrays a passionate solo mother who confronts her son's school out of a deep love for her troubled boy. Since then, she has taken a range of diverse roles in projects that surprise and delight audiences. They include *Brush Up Life*, a contemporary depiction of reincarnation written by popular Japanese comedian

Bakarhythm; a supporting role in the hit blockbuster *Godzilla Minus One*; and *Bad Lands*, a high-octane, much-discussed film by Masato Harada, in which she plays the female member of a nefarious gang – reminiscent of the recent real-life scam groups shaking up Japan. In contemporary Japanese cinema today, it's no exaggeration to say that Ando is an indispensable figure.

Ando is the youngest daughter in a family where every member is an artist. Her father, Eiji Okuda, is one of Japan's most renowned actors, who successfully turned to directing after his 50th birthday, in 2001. Her mother, Kazu Ando, is an essayist and a well-known TV personality. Momoko Ando, her older sister, made her directorial debut at 28 with *A Piece of Our Life* and has published novels. Ando's husband, Tasuku Emoto, is another talented actor. Her father-in-law, Akira Emoto, is a character actor in Japanese cinema, well known for his distinctive roles, and her brother-in-law, Tokio, is a young,



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up-and-coming actor. Surrounded by this richly artistic family, Ando is devoted to raising her daughter in a provincial city, away from Tokyo.

In December, among the hustle and bustle of the year-end crowd, Ando casually wandered into the tea salon of a high-rise hotel in Tokyo's Shinbashi neighborhood for our interview. Dressed informally, she took a seat with a gentle smile, ready for a discussion about her life in film and the end of what she calls her "first chapter."

KASUMIKO MURAKAMI *It seems like you've been quite busy. It was hard to get in touch!*

SAKURA ANDO Yes, indeed. I went to Hawaii for the Hawaii International Film Festival, where I received the Halekulani Vanguard Award [the "rising star" prize] for *A Man*. After that, I was in England with my sister, who had a film shoot in Manchester.

K.M. *You were also in Cannes last year for the film festival...*

S.A. I really wanted to go to the Venice Film Festival, too, but the day before I was supposed to leave, my daughter tested positive for Covid-19 so I had to cancel abruptly. But after that, I went to the Busan International Film Festival for the screening of *A Man*, which was very well received.

K.M. *You've been to Cannes twice now, with Shoplifters and Monster. Do you have a lot of meetings while you're there? Do you want to work in foreign films?*

S.A. Not necessarily, but it's fun to be around the people who created all these films. I really want to meet the director Emir Kusturica – I love his worldview and passionate imagery. Even when I'm not at film festivals, I sometimes get offers from abroad, but I've turned them down. Having grown up in a multicultural environment, I think it would be nice to shoot abroad. However, that doesn't mean that

I'm determined to go overseas at all costs. Speaking of the Cannes Film Festival, I brought my five-year-old daughter and my mother to it, and we stayed at a lovely hotel in Nice. While there, we visited the Matisse Museum. By chance, I was asked to film a video presentation for the Matisse exhibition in Tokyo so I thought, "I'm so glad I got to know Nice."

K.M. *The way you portray characters is always impressive. How do you get into your roles?*

S.A. I tend to view my roles quite objectively. For me, the most important element is that I step into my role considering everything around me at the time. I gather everyone's thoughts about my character and take in my surroundings, like the location or the cup of water sitting in front of me. I believe that genuine moments are born out of being influenced by such things. I observe the changes in those elements in that particular moment. I diligently watch everything evolving

“Just thinking about how I will change excites me. As long as I’m alive, there might be chance encounters and unexpected events that I can’t even imagine.”

around me. I try not to preconceive how things should be. By doing that, I can go to places I hadn’t even imagined.

K.M. *Your first film, Out of the Wind, was directed by your father, Eiji Okuda. Your sister, Momoko, was the assistant director, and your mother, Kazu, helped out on set. What was that experience on set like?*

S.A. I felt extremely frustrated because I couldn’t express myself at all. I was trying to challenge my father, and I felt very defiant toward him. I wasn’t supposed to play the role, but the original actor dropped out, so I had to do it on short notice. Because of that situation, I strongly felt like, “Oh, I have no experience, but I have been thrust into this job.” My dad never really understood my appeal, but it’s different when my sister is the director. I feel like she understands me.

K.M. *Did you always want to be an actor?*

S.A. I’ve always loved fantasizing about making films, ever since I was a little girl. I always wanted to lend my body to someone else. But I never idolized actors and disliked the term “actor” in the first place. I might have wanted to become a performer. It wasn’t until I saw *Bonnie and Clyde* that the idea of acting came to my mind. I participated in theater workshops during my university days, focusing on Shakespeare and such, when I was around 18 or 19. At one point, I thought the stage would be nice, but I don’t have the desire for that now.

K.M. *You’ve worked with many outstanding directors, including Hirokazu Kore-eda, with whom you’ve collaborated several times.*

S.A. What sets Kore-eda apart is that everyone can be themselves around him. Both the staff and actors feel they can fully use their strengths. Sometimes the scenarios would change, but the director made sure to explain the important parts to us. With *Monster*, I could thoroughly discuss things with him. I had never engaged in such extensive discussions with a director before, so I hadn’t considered communication about the work to be so crucial. I used to avoid talking much with directors during filming, but recently, I find it most enjoyable to converse with everyone during shoots. Anyway, he was a nice man and kind to everybody.

K.M. *You also starred in Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s television drama Penance. What was that like for you?*

S.A. Both my husband and father-in-law are big fans of Kurosawa, so when I was offered the role, they were surprised. When we started filming, Kurosawa was calm and had a very gentle demeanor. It was so enjoyable. What I found different from other directors was that while others might say, “You should feel this way in this scene, and you must do this,” Kurosawa only gives instructions like, “Please crouch down here.” Asking why it should be done that way would seem presumptuous, so I didn’t ask him.

K.M. *Recently, you also appeared in the television series Brush Up Life, written by Bakarhythm. How is TV different from films?*

S.A. For me, there is no difference between movies and TV dramas. If there’s a lively atmosphere, we are able to create with everyone chatting. Being in the present moment is what’s important. But with TV dramas, I feel like the performers and the audience feel closer to each other, and I quite like that sensation.

K.M. *Is there any actor you would like to costar with?*

S.A. I’ve been a big fan of Matt Damon ever since I was a kid. Once, I received an offer from the U.S. to act alongside him, but after thinking it through, I declined. Because if I costar with him, I would no longer be a fan, and I want to remain a fan forever.

K.M. *Has anything changed in you since becoming a mother?*

S.A. Since her birth, I feel like life has become more light-hearted. My daughter made the heavy things disappear. Rather than a mother-daughter relationship, I want a more simple, mutually respectful relationship with her. There is constantly something new with her, so I want to make sure I don’t miss anything. Instead of imposing my thoughts on her, I want us to think together.

K.M. *What kind of films will you be in from now on?*

S.A. This is where my first chapter comes to an end, and it’s not related to the end of the year. My project *The Imaginary* will be released this month, but once that’s done, this act of my life will come to a temporary close.

K.M. *What do you mean by a “close”?*

S.A. My daughter will be a first-grader, so I don’t want to make any plans right now. Just thinking about how I will change excites me. As long as I’m alive, there might be chance encounters and unexpected events that I can’t even imagine. I want to experience movements and music that I haven’t been exposed to before. 🍷



Stylist's own tank top and cargo trousers and jewelry by TIFFANY & CO.

Hair by Kenshin. Makeup by Kanako Hoshino. Production by Kaori Oyama and Saori Yoshida.