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Japanese animator and character designer Yoichi Kotabe poses next to cartoon boards from the Japanese animated series 'Heidi, daughter of the Alps' during his visit to an exhibition titled 'Heidi in Japan' at the Swiss National Museum in Zurich. — AFP photos



Japanese animator and character designer Yoichi Kotabe, left, speaks with Japanese producer Junzo Nakajima.



Visitors walk through the exhibition titled 'Heidi in Japan.'

## How 'Heidi' conquered Japan, sparking an anime revolution

Heidi and Super Mario may not seem to have much in common but anime and video game aficionados will detect the signature style of Japanese character designer Yoichi Kotabe in both. Far from the Swiss Alps, the cherished 19th-century storybook character Heidi has played an unlikely role in the creation of Japan's now booming anime industry. The story of the little orphan girl who goes to live with her gruff grandfather in the mountains took Japan by storm in the 1970s with the animation series "Alps no Shojo Heidi" ("Heidi: A Girl of the Alps").

The 52-part TV show, which became a worldwide hit, marked a turning point in the careers of its creators, including Kotabe. He was subsequently recruited by video game pioneer Nintendo to redesign a host of characters in Mario. Heidi also boosted the standing of director Isao Takahata, best known for the animated war film "Grave of the Fireflies", and Hayao Miyazaki, creator of films "Spirited Away" and "My Neighbor Totoro".

The two joined forces to set up the celebrated anime Studio Ghibli. Heidi's Japanese adventure is explored in an exhibition at the Swiss National Museum in Zurich,

running until October 13. Kotabe has been invited to take part in the event to explain the genesis of the character he first began sketching nearly four decades ago.

### Kawaii

"The goal was to have a little girl who was 'kawaii', as cute as possible," he told AFP, describing how he had first drawn her with large eyes, a big smile, but also "little braids". But he said that when he presented his first sketches, a specialist on the 1880 novel by Johanna Spyri pointed out that "Heidi is a five year-old girl who lives in the mountains with her grandfather, who is not very friendly". "He is not going to do her braids every morning."

Kotabe was prompted to rethink her image and gave Heidi the ruffled, short, dark locks that fans of the series saw from the first episode in 1974. Although many adaptations of Heidi have been made for film and TV over the decades, Kotabe's version has thoroughly seeped into the public perception of the character. And yet, the animated version of Heidi who would go on to be dubbed into 20 languages almost never came about.

### Sketching the Swiss Alp

Takahata had initially wanted to adapt the story of Pippi Longstocking to the screen. But Swedish author Astrid Lindgren turned down the offer, saying she feared the Japanese director was interested "only in money", Kotabe said. So the director turned his attention to another classic of children's literature, and the team of Japanese animation artists headed to Switzerland to study Alpine cabins and pastures around the small eastern village of Maienfeld.

"This was entirely new for us," Kotabe said, pointing out that he had never been outside of Japan before. "The time was very short, so we were aware that we had to gather as much material as possible," he said, describing how the team had spent a month furiously sketching their surroundings. Takahata, who died last year at the age of 82, was known for the realism of his animations and attention to detail in depicting ordinary life and nature.

### Piece of art

"People see (Heidi) as children's entertainment," Hans Thomsen, an art history professor at Zurich University and

curator of the exhibit, told AFP. But the series is in fact "a piece of art", he insisted, pointing to its "creativity, visual impact and ability to move people". The exhibition consists of a large number of animation panels, aquarelles and sketches of baby goats observed by the artists during their Alpine excursion.

Objects hinting at the series' success in Japan are also on display, including Heidi-adorned bento boxes, origami kits and packs of fondue cheese. "The images of Heidi and her adventures in the mountains have had a strong impact on the Japanese, both young and old," Veronique Kanel, of Swiss Tourism, told AFP. But she added that the series had also allowed "this image of Switzerland as a paradise of Alpine nature" to be spread around the world, drawing huge numbers of tourists to Heidi's remote valley.

Kotabe recalled how surprised he had been in the 1970s to see "no visible traces of Heidi" in Maienfeld. The TV series he helped create has changed that, with its success reflected in a dedicated Heidi museum, special hiking trail and souvenir shops. "Today, everything in Maienfeld has to do with Heidi," Kotabe said. —AFP



Joaquin Phoenix poses at the premiere of 'Joker' at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. — Reuters

## 'Joker' not a hero, says studio, as Aurora families voice concern

Warner Bros. on Tuesday denied its controversial film "Joker" portrays its murderous outcast villain as a hero, after families affected by the Aurora theater mass shooting penned an open letter expressing concern. The much-hyped new Joaquin Phoenix film, billed as a "character study" of Batman's nemesis, has been hailed as an Oscar contender but has raised concerns that its depiction of mental illness and violence could prove incendiary.

Its release next month comes seven years after a man opened fire in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado showing a late-night premiere of a Batman film, killing 12 and wounding 70. Five members of victims' families wrote an open letter in Hollywood trade publications Tuesday. "When we learned that Warner Bros. was releasing a movie called 'Joker' that presents the character as a protagonist with a sympathetic origin story, it gave us pause," it said.

The film depicts the Joker as a severely depressed young man trying to build a career as a stand-up comic, but who is constantly rejected and beaten by society until taking matters into his own-extremely violent-hands. In their letter, the Aurora families noted that their real-life tragedy had been "perpetrated by a socially isolated individual who felt 'wronged' by society."

While the open letter did not condemn the film, and expressed support for "free speech and free expression," it urged the Hollywood studio to use its platform to lobby for gun reform and support victims. In response, Warner said "neither the fictional character Joker, nor the film, is an endorsement of real-world violence of any kind. It is not the intention of the film, the filmmakers or the studio to hold this character up as a hero."

Warner described gun violence as a "critical issue" and said it had donated to victims and supported gun control legislation. "At the same time, Warner Bros. believes that one of the functions of storytelling is to provoke difficult conversations around complex issues," it added.

### 'Not good enough'

The US gun control debate reignited last month after the massacres of 22 people at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, nine by a gunman in Dayton, Ohio, and a further seven in a shooting rampage in Odessa, Texas. Most presidential candidates, including Democratic frontrunner Joe Biden, are calling for a new assault weapons ban. Candidate Beto O'Rourke has gone further, calling for a mandatory buyback program for assault weapons.

The Aurora shooting was carried out during a packed screening of "The Dark Knight Rises," in a meticulously-planned attack during which shooter James Holmes wore body armor and used tear gas to prevent victims from escaping. Reports at the time said Holmes told authorities he was "The Joker," Batman's sworn enemy in the comic book series. Aurora police now say there is no evidence Holmes—who appeared in court with brightly dyed hair similar to the character—said that. Holmes is serving life in prison. Sandy Phillips, whose daughter Jessica Ghawi was among those killed, wrote on Twitter that Warner's response was "not good enough." "Joker" is released in theaters October 4. —AFP

## Emmys winner Waller-Bridge pens major Amazon deal

Newly crowned multiple-Emy-winner Phoebe Waller-Bridge has signed a major new deal with Amazon after her creation "Fleabag" dominated the comedy awards at television's answer to the Oscars. British actress and writer Waller-Bridge, who also co-wrote spy thriller "Killing Eve" and upcoming James Bond film "No Time To Die," confirmed her status as one of comedy's hottest properties at Sunday's awards.

"Fleabag," a joint production between Amazon and the BBC, won six Emmys including best comedy series, as well as best actress and comedy writing for Waller-Bridge herself. Waller-Bridge said in a statement Tuesday she was "insanely excited" to pen the new deal with Amazon, which Hollywood media reported was worth

around \$20 million per year over three years. "Working with the team on Fleabag was the creative partnership dreams are made of. It really feels like home. I can't wait to get going!" she said.

Jennifer Salke, head of Amazon Studios, described Waller-Bridge as "clever, brilliant, generous and a virtuoso on multiple fronts including writing, acting and producing." The statement said Waller-Bridge would create and produce new television content exclusively for its Amazon Prime platform, without giving details or confirming the size of the deal. She will continue to executive produce HBO's romantic comedy thriller "Run," it added. —AFP



Phoebe Waller-Bridge poses with awards for Outstanding Comedy Series, Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series, and Outstanding Directing for a Comedy Series in the press room during the 71st Emmy Awards at Microsoft Theater in Los Angeles, California. — AFP



French director Ladj Ly arrives for the US premiere of 'Les Misérables' during Colcoa French Film Festival Opening Night at the DGA theatre in Los Angeles. — AFP

## France Oscars pick 'Les Misérables' a 'universal' warning cry

"Les Misérables" is France's official candidate for the Oscars—but the film's stark portrayal of police violence and brutalized youths is a "universal" warning cry about poverty and racism, its director told AFP. Ladj Ly's film follows the consequences of a violent police blunder in a tense and racially divided suburb of Paris, through the eyes of a cop who has just joined its anti-crime unit. Speaking to AFP Monday on the red carpet of Los Angeles' French cinema festival COLCOA, Ly said the film "is universal and should speak to as many people as possible."

"Poverty is found in the four corners of the world—we can be in the United States, Brazil in the favelas or South Africa." "This film is a warning cry from me to the politicians," he told the US premiere audience later. "And I tell them that the situation is complicated, this has been going on for 30 years, but there are always solutions."

Ly told AFP he was "super proud" but surprised by Friday's announcement that the film had been selected to represent France at February's Academy Awards, beating competition such as Eva Green-starring astronaut drama "Proxima." "It's a huge source of pride. We're all very happy," he said, adding: "We didn't really expect it—we thought that we had very little chance with the films we were up against." "Les Misérables" begins with jubilant scenes of an apparently united Paris as France lifts the 2018 World Cup. But the deep rifts in society are quickly laid bare as violent police officers, drug dealers and Islamists pull the children of Montfermeil's housing projects in different directions. Montfermeil is famous as the setting of Victor Hugo's 19th-century novel, from which the film takes its name. Ly said he drew on his own experiences in the Paris suburb—including watching France's previous World Cup win in 1998, which was credited with temporarily bringing down racial divisions. "Unfortunately today, we have the impression that only football can unite us all, can tell us that we are all together and we are all French," he said. —AFP

## Record-breaking Malaysian water chute unveiled

One of the world's longest water slides was unveiled in Malaysia yesterday, a kilometer-long chute that starts on a hilltop before twisting and turning through dense jungle and splashing into a pool. The blue and yellow chute at the ESCAPE theme park runs for 1,111 meters and has been awarded the Guinness World Record for the longest water slide where riders use an inflatable tube. It is three times longer than the previous record-holding slide in Germany.

The watercourse in northern Penang state starts on a hill, at a height of some 70 meters, with riders transported to the top by a specially constructed chairlift. It takes four minutes to slide down the chute, which passes through a rainforest inhabited by exotic creatures, from birds to monkeys, before passing over a road and ending in the park.

"The idea of this water slide came about over frustration that most fun rides and water slides last merely a few seconds, and having the water slide start on a hilltop at a 70 meter elevation would make this ride last a good few minutes," said Sim Choo Kheng, boss of park operator Sim Leisure Group. It is expected to open to the public next month.

Building the 488 piece slide was mostly done manually, without using heavy machinery, to avoid damaging the natural environment, the operator said. China is home to an even bigger water slide, a 2,720 meter ride that winds down a hillside in Lishui. Guinness this month named it the world's longest mountain water slide. —AFP



Sim Choo Kheng, center, Chief Executive Officer of Sim Leisure Group slide down on a float on the world's longest water slide at Escape theme park in Teluk Bahang, Malaysia.



This aerial handout picture shows the world's longest water slide at Escape theme park in Teluk Bahang, Malaysia. — AFP photos