

Japanese Society, Here and Now A New Century of Film

By Julian Ryall



I recently had the good fortune to interview some of the senior executives of Toho Co. on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the company that has since grown into one of Japan's "Big Three" film companies. The domestic movie industry has gone through some very difficult times in the last three decades and there was even a time that an art form that gave the world directors of the stature of Imamura Shohei, Ozu Yasujiro and Kurosawa Akira – to name but a few – might fold entirely.

In the last decade alone, new forms of entertainment, based primarily on the popularity of home-use personal computers and software, have come along to detract from a trip to "the pictures," as my own parents still quaintly refer to the prime medium of the generation that grew up in the 1940s and 50s. So if the new millennium brought down the curtain on the century of film, what does the future hold for Japan's domestic industry?

"The 20th century was the movie century and I was worried that the 21st century might not be so good for Japanese movies," said Takai Hideyuki, president of Toho Co. "But the move to digital and the introduction of other new technologies suggest that this will again be a century of film.

"Satellite broadcasting, the Internet, broadband distribution, DVDs – all of them can carry motion pictures, which in itself increases the demand for more films," he said.

Japan has an undoubted edge in technology and its animated movies and television programs are second-to-none, but it is also aware that it cannot rest on its laurels, even though 2006 was the best for Japanese cinema in more than two decades.

■ An Impressive Movie Year

The industry had good reason to give itself a pat on the back when the final figures were released in February. Admissions were up 2.4% to 163.27 million, according to the

Motion Picture Producers' Association of Japan, while domestic releases earned a record ¥107.75 billion over the year.

Of the record total of 821 releases, 417 were Japanese and six home-grown titles secured hit status by taking more than \$40 million during the year, the biggest among them Studio Ghibli's "Tale from Earthsea" with \$63.7 million. "Umizaru 2: Test of Trust" recorded \$56.7 million and fellow Fuji Television Network Inc. title "Suite Dreams" came in with \$50.2 million.

The three biggest earners at the box office were, however, imports – the latest Harry Potter film took \$91 million, "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest" earned \$82.8 million and "The Da Vinci Code" came in third with \$74.7 million – but 2006 was a poor year by Hollywood's standards and domestic films earned more than imports for the first time in 21 years.

And there is always room for improvement, believes Toho Chairman Matsuoka Isao, particularly by building on the arrival of new technology and methods of distribution.

"Things are not as good as they were back in the old days, when we were able to sell more than one billion tickets a year, but even with the advent of a television in virtually every home in Japan, I still believe that the cinema is in a field of its own," he said in an interview from his offices overlooking a statue of Toho's most famous big-screen name – *Godzilla* – standing sentinel in the square below.

"This world has changed," he said, pointing to the quality of new releases, advances in areas such as three-dimensional images, digital cinema and a wider array of distribution routes, along with a more enjoyable all-round experience for anyone who wants to go to a theater now.

As much as the technical advances, Japanese movie-goers expect more from a new generation of film-makers. The directorial shoes of Imamura, Ozu and Kurosawa may be large ones to fill, but with

home-grown productions drawing large audiences once again, the industry has the chance to stretch its movie-making wings.

■ Fresh Film-making Faces

To stay ahead of the latest outings by *Spiderman*, *Jack Sparrow* and *Shrek*, movie-goers will be looking to young faces such as Yamashita Nobuhiro, Lee Sang Il, Kumakiri Kazuyoshi and Ninagawa Mika.

Yamashita, 31, made the breakthrough with "*Linda Linda Linda*" in 2005 and enhanced his reputation last year by directing "*The Matsugane Potshot Affair*" and there are high hopes for his latest project, "*Tennen Kokkeko*," which is based on a long-running *manga* series of the same name and is due to be released in the summer.

Lee, a 33-year-old ethnic Korean who was born and grew up in Japan, won three awards for last year's "*Hula Girls*," including the Japanese Academy's best director title, and a special citation at the Vancouver International Film Festival for an earlier movie, "*Border Line*."

Kumakiri's violent "*Freesia*" – another title based on a *manga* – has already done well at the box office since opening in February. It is, however, unlikely to win him another award, as "*Sora no Ana*" did in the Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2001.

But of all the up-and-coming talents in the Japanese movie world, special praise has been heaped on a complete newcomer for her take on the world of Tokyo's pleasure quarters in "*Sakuran*" – although that may well be because it has been compared to Rob Marshall's "*Memoirs of a Geisha*," which was lambasted in Japan.

Ninagawa is a photographer by profession, but her screen debut, which opened in February 2004, has been applauded for its colorful portrayal of life in the brothels of the Yoshiwara entertainment district and manages to incorporate music video-style editing and a techno and jazz soundtrack.

Miyazaki's Return

And while none of these titles is likely to be a blockbuster on the scale of Fuji's "Bayside Shakedown 2" – which was seen by 13 million people and earned \$142 million at the box office, making it the largest grossing live-action title in Japanese movie history – the industry will have been buoyed by the news that Miyazaki Hayao is back at work on an animated tale with the title "Ponyo on the Cliff Top," his first project since "Howl's Moving Castle" raked in \$163 million after its release in November 2004.

"Ponyo" will not, unfortunately, have an impact on this year's figures as it will not be screened until the summer of 2008, but it is virtually guaranteed to leave its mark on one area in which Japanese movies have traditionally failed to leave one: markets beyond Japan.

Local films still fail to travel well, partly because so few Japanese actors and actresses are able to speak English and therefore make the leap to Hollywood, according to Roberto De Vido, a spokesman for the Motion Picture Association of Japan. Only Watanabe Ken is recognizable to an American audience, he points out, meaning that Marshall was obliged to cast English-speaking Chinese actresses in the lead roles in "Memoirs of a Geisha" – which caused outrage here – and a Japanese achieving what Jackie Chan has is inconceivable.

"Another problem that it has is one that affects so many Japanese industries," De Vido says. "It is a myopic industry because the domestic market is big enough to keep everybody happy. And if the market here is large enough, the film studios ask themselves whether they need to make a story that has legs overseas."

Raising Profile Overseas

But the film companies do accept that raising their profile in other countries needs to be their next target; Tokyo Broadcasting System produced seven feature films in 2006 – including "The Sinking of Japan," which took an impressive \$44 million at the box office – and is making a conscious effort to project its name by taking part in last year's Pusan film festival market and the Tokyo International Film Festival for the first time, as well as its regular appearances at Cannes and the American Film Market.

"We believe Pusan is the hottest film festival in Asia and we see it as a good opportunity to concentrate on sales to Asia," said Sugiyama Makito, deputy vice president of the Content Business Department at TBS. "We have received good reactions from buyers worldwide through these markets and sold our movies to dozens of countries."

Nippon Television's Film Project Department is also making progress with sales, particularly with the increase in titles being released theatrically very close to the Japanese schedule, particularly in Asian markets, said division manager Okuda Seiji.

"Basically, Asian countries are buying our titles, such as the 'Death Note' series," said Nagata Fumiko of NTV's sales division. "We're still in the early stages of overseas promotion, but the popularity of 'Death Note' has left us all very optimistic."

"We have done very well in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, but we're still trying to get into the US market," she admitted. "We've not reached any agreements yet, but there are a number of companies that have expressed interest in buying the 'Death Note' title and we are still in discussions."

Industry Looking Forward

Indeed, with a shrinking population, Japanese movie companies will need to tap into foreign markets in the future if they do not want to see a repeat of the disastrous decline in the industry here from the 1970s, which saw the number of cinema screens fall to a mere 1,734 in 1993. That figure has recovered the 3,000 level today and, combined with clever marketing campaigns, going to the movies has become a popular past-time once more.

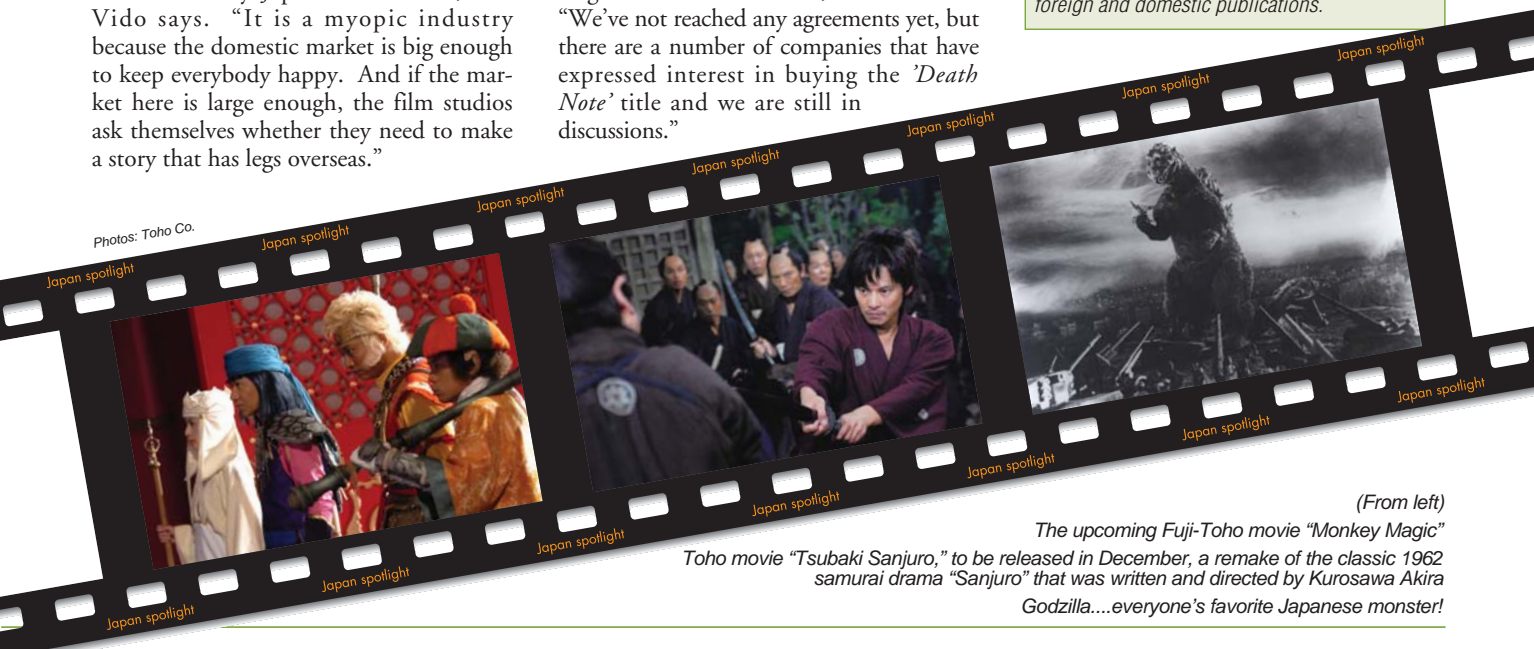
But the industry is aware that it must look forward rather than backwards.

"The people who are making movies are younger now so there is a closer connection with the audience, while the number of movies is increasing and more money is being spent on making them better," believes Toho's Matsuoka. "At the same time, directing, production and acting skills are improving."

"But also 20 years ago it was cool to go and see a US movie, but Japanese films were the absolute opposite," he adds. "About five years ago, people stopped comparing where a film was made and instead chose a film based simply on whether it was good or not. If it's good, people will watch it." **JS**

Julian Ryall is a freelance journalist who has been working in Japan for 14 years. A graduate of the post-graduate journalism program at the University of Central Lancashire, England, he has written about events and issues concerning his adopted homeland for a wide range of foreign and domestic publications.

Photos: Toho Co.



(From left)

The upcoming Fuji-Toho movie "Monkey Magic" Toho movie "Tsubaki Sanjuro," to be released in December, a remake of the classic 1962 samurai drama "Sanjuro" that was written and directed by Kurosawa Akira
Godzilla....everyone's favorite Japanese monster!