

“Eternally Yours”

– Japanese Comedy with an International Appeal –

Photo: YAMAGUCHI Manako ©Globetrot Productions 2006



Filmmaker Atsushi OGATA

By *Atsushi OGATA*

In the past months, our short Japanese film “*Eternally Yours*” (Japanese title “*Furochoju*”) has been selected, screened and even awarded prizes at prestigious international film festivals in various parts of the world – New York, Bangkok, California and Sao Paulo.

“*Eternally Yours*” takes place in the Japanese countryside of Niigata, where Teruko, an elderly lady, lives alone. One day, a man arrives at her house delivering a golden package and asks her to pay the bill. Teruko mistakes him for her childhood friend, and invites him inside. The man tries to trick her into giving him more money, but the seemingly forgetful Teruko is full of surprises... This battle of wits between the two characters plays upon social prejudice and preconceptions about senior citizens.

Background / Motivation

How did I come to make such a film? I was born in Japan, grew up in Tokyo attending Japanese schools, then moved to New York at age 13, finished my higher education in America, graduating with a master’s degree in video art. Then I lived for more than 10 years in Europe, making and exhibiting art videos and installations, writing screenplays for films with European grants, and acting as a comedian on Dutch TV.

Living in such diverse places, I found myself constantly being mistaken for someone else. Perhaps, I adapt too easily and quickly to my environment like a “chameleon.” For example, I would walk into a store selling greeting cards in New York, and other customers would immediately mistake me for a sales clerk. In London, a semi-hoodlum mistook me for a South American stow-away. In Austria, I was mistaken for a gas station attendant, while in Boston, I was mistaken for a Chinese food delivery man as well as a hospital receptionist. All these odd experiences inspired me to write a script about “mistaken identity,” which is one of the themes in “*Eternally Yours*,” where Teruko keeps mistaking the con-man for someone else from her past.

Photo: YAMAGUCHI Manako ©Globetrot Productions 2006



Cast & crew of “*Eternally Yours*”

The other inspiration for this film is that one winter, when I was visiting my parents in Japan for the Christmas-New Year’s holidays, my father suddenly fell ill due to a heart failure. I had to rush him to a hos-

pital, navigating our way through the Tokyo traffic. Having spent more time closer to my elderly parents, I became eager to create a movie that could support and cheer up senior citizens. Researching social trends in Japan, I learned that in recent years, there had been an increasingly number of crimes targeting senior citizens.

Making of “*Eternally Yours*”

Later in the winter, as my father was recovering from his illness, I had a chance to propose my new film idea to Kitagawa Fram, director of the Art Front Gallery in Tokyo, who had commissioned me for various video projects over the past years. Kitagawa also runs the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial in the Tokamachi region of Niigata, Japan. In Tokamachi, real con-men had actually arrived among volunteer helpers and had tried to deceive local senior citizens after they suffered a devastating earthquake and heavy snowstorms. The triennial organizer accepted my proposal, and I suddenly had to kick into action. With a limited budget, and less than three months before the premiere, I suddenly had to create a film in a country where I had never made a dramatic fiction film before.

The key to realizing this film was gaining support of talented, experienced, and enthusiastic collaborators. First, I gained support of actress Ikeda Michie, who was introduced to me through renowned feminist video artist Idemitsu Mako. Ikeda had acted in a number of Idemitsu’s videos previously. I met Ikeda for coffee for the first time. Ikeda read my script immediately and offered to play the lead role on the spot.

Viewing numerous contemporary Japanese films, I was particularly impressed by the cinematography of talented director of photography Nagata Yuichi JSC. Upon introduction by curator/filmmaker David d’Heilly, I had a chance to meet Nagata. Having read

my script, Nagata agreed to come on board and offered to shoot *"Eternally Yours"* with the latest Panasonic HD camera. Nagata, a board member of the Japan Society of Cinematographers (JSC), had shot more than 110 feature films, including the renowned Japanese film *"Water Boys."*

Having seen Masuoka Tooru act in numerous films, including a Japanese film called *"Pretty Woman"* about an amateur theater group comprised of elderly ladies, I decided that Masuoka would be the best actor to play the role of the clumsy con-man in my film. I made a "cold call" to Masuoka's office, faxed them my script, and within five days got his acceptance to play the con-man.

Nagata introduced me to experienced art director Sakurai Yohichi and hair/makeup artist Kozakai Nana, along with a team of young film crew. Sakurai, trained in the traditional Japanese studio, came up with various ideas to use props effectively and humorously within the film, and I quickly rewrote the script to incorporate as many of his suggestions as possible. Sakurai also did the calligraphy for the box of fake-pills in the film. The calligraphy was later used in the title sequence designed by Karim Cherif, a Dutch designer, who created the opening and end credits on his computer in the Netherlands, and sent them to me over the Internet. Karim had also designed the opening and end credits for my earlier semi-autobiographical comedy *"Champagne"* about a Japanese photographer visiting a Dutch gallery owner in Amsterdam.

Kozakai transformed actress Ikeda from an almost Western-looking contemporary urban senior citizen to a traditional elderly woman from the Japanese countryside within a matter of half an hour everyday, allowing Ikeda to look more than 15 years her senior in the film.

Learning Japanese film jargon from my assistant director Fukushi Ori, I proceeded to direct our film at the Alpha Studio in northern Tokyo, where also Kitano Takeshi and other well-known directors had shot their films. We shot in less than two days, then edited in less than a week with the help of editor Inagawa Miki, using Final Cut Pro on her latest G5 laptop with a fast Intel board.

For the title sequence and end credits, we chose one of the traditional music tunes, *"Tokamachi Boogie,"* sung by Ichimaru, a famous *geisha*-singer popular in the 1950s and 60s. The lyrics describe how Tokamachi is known for the heaviest snowfall in the whole of Japan.

Screenings

On July 23, 2006, *"Eternally Yours"* officially opened to tens of thousands of visitors throughout the summer for 50 days at the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, and in Tokyo, an evening of preview screenings was held at the Swedish Embassy.

Photo: NAGATA Yuichi JSC ©GlobeTrot Productions 2006



Actress IKEDA Michie and actor MASUOKA Tooru in *"Eternally Yours"* directed by Atsushi OGATA

In March 2007, *"Eternally Yours"* was selected as the only Japanese entry to the prestigious 36th New Directors/New Films festival held at the Museum of Modern Art and Lincoln Center in New York, where hundreds of New Yorkers broke out in laughter. In July, it was selected for the Bangkok International Film Festival in Thailand and won the Best Short Film Award. *"Eternally Yours"* was then selected for five festivals in California: the Palm Springs International Festival of Short Films, the 30th Mill Valley Film Festival, the Moondance International Film Festival, LA Shorts, and the Big Bear Lake International Film Festival. It won the Seahorse Award (Best Short Film) at Moondance. Then in the fall, it premiered in Latin America at the 31st Sao Paulo International Film Festival in Brazil.

For me, it has been very exciting to watch so many people laughing in the cinema in different countries and giving me positive feedback. I have often heard people say that humor/comedy is very difficult to transport across cultures. However, in the case of *"Eternally Yours,"* the situational comedy of wit and deception seems to be something more universal that has a wider appeal to sophisticated audiences from differing cultural backgrounds. They seem to enjoy watching the two characters trying to out-smart each other.

Future Projects

I plan to make more humorous films that take an ironic look at our society and human interactions. Our next short film *"Farewell My Bodyguard,"* which hopefully will attract funding with the success of *"Eternally Yours,"* will also have this element of a "deceptive comedy." It is about an interpreter who has to concoct fictional tales and mediate between an American aid worker visiting Japan, who only speaks English, and a Japanese gangster on the run who only speaks Japanese; the three characters are stuck in one location and have to deal with one another. After my next short film, hopefully, I will be ready to tackle my first feature film. **J.S**

Atsushi Ogata is a filmmaker, screenwriter, video artist and actor. Born in Japan, Ogata graduated from Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's master's program. His art videos have been shown at festivals and museums worldwide, his screenplays have been funded in Germany and the Netherlands, and he has appeared regularly on Dutch TV.