

# "Cast me if you can"

## Romantic Comedy Bridging Generations

By Atsushi OGATA



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Photo: 2010 Dream On Productions

### Cast Me If You Can

Premiering at the 13th Shanghai International Film Festival in June, our Japanese comedy feature *"Cast me if you can"* (Japanese title *"Wakiyaku Monogatari"*) was released theatrically nationwide in Japan and in San Francisco. This came after its festival run in California, New York, Indiana and India and winning prizes for Best Actress, Best Title Sequence and Best Original Score in California. It has also been turned into a novel, published by Takeshobo Co., and the DVD is available on Amazon with English subtitles and the director's commentary in English by T.O. Entertainment.

*"Cast me if you can"* tells the story of Hiroshi, a perpetual supporting actor, always mistaken for others and living in the shadow of his famous playwright father, who longs to be a leading man. Hiroshi gets his break when cast in a Woody Allen remake, but a series of misadventures and a chance encounter with his muse Aya, an aspiring actress, turns his world upside down. Hiroshi falls for Aya head over heels and struggles to play the lead in his own life. A sweet, subtle romantic comedy for all generations, intended to leave everyone smiling.

#### Motivation

As traditional family values and structures disintegrate in Japan, we hear daily on the news about crimes committed between family members – an elderly father killing his middle-aged son for not having a job, abuse against the elderly, children neglected.... In such a demor-

Photo: 2010 Dream On Productions



Actress Hiromi NAGASAKU and actor Masahiko TSUGAWA



Actress Hiromi NAGASAKU and actor Toru MASUOKA in *"Cast me if you can"* directed by Atsushi Ogata

alized social climate, I felt it was especially important to create a film which bridges the gap between generations. I decided to portray characters of different generations – an elderly father, a middle-aged protagonist, and his younger muse and friend – all interacting with each other in a positive way, despite occasional misunderstanding and conflicts. Even if what our film shows is not the average or typical interactions we might observe in Japanese society today, what I felt more important was to give the audience hope by showing them that such interactions *might* be possible and to trigger the audience to reflect on their own lives. If the audience watch our film and laugh, then begin to laugh about their own lives, perhaps they would approach their own lives with a more positive attitude. In a country such as Japan, where, though economically wealthy, an average 100 people commit suicide every day, I felt this especially meaningful.

I also felt it important to address this issue in a lighthearted, comical, entertaining, enjoyable way rather than in a serious, somber manner. Humor is much more effective in getting a point across to the audience, who might become bored or reject a more didactic presentation. Comic relief can be an inspiring way to shed light on personal and social difficulties, and ultimately to overcome them. In my conversations with my elderly parents, it is also clear that even such topics as aging, if handled in a humorous way, can be a source of joy and inspiration. My previous award-winning short film *"Eternally Yours,"* which I wrote about in *Japan SPOTLIGHT's* January/February 2008 issue, was a battle of wits between an elderly lady and a con-man. Not only was the film presented and awarded at festivals internationally, it was also invited to be presented at Keiyu Hospital, a hospital for the elderly, to cheer up senior citizens and their families.



Actor Toru MASUOKA and actress Keiko MATSUZAKA

## Conception

As I was traveling back from the Sao Paulo International Film Festival where *"Eternally Yours"* was screened, I began conceiving the idea for my new film *"Cast me if you can."* I had this image of Toru Masuoka running around Tokyo in police uniform. Having cast Masuoka in *"Eternally Yours"* and being impressed with his humorous and skillful acting, I wanted to work with him also for *"Cast me if you can."* The other thought that came to my mind was the American TV sit-com *"Frasier,"* in which a recently divorced radio-personality psychologist moves back home to live with his retired ex-policeman father. As I recently moved back to live at my own parents' house and spend time with my father, a humorous ex-banker, such a father-son odd-couple comedy is what I personally experience on a daily basis. Both of these elements were the starting point for our film *"Cast me if you can."*

Having worked initially as a visual artist, creating numerous meditative art videos and installations, my motivation had been to create work that provided relaxing reflective moments for the audience. In more recent years, as I moved from video art to screenwriting, acting and directing film, I began to work more with humor. In my recent films, my intention has been to make the audience laugh and at the same time address some underlying universal issues. As an artist/creator, I've always believed that it is critical to have an overall purpose to one's artistic endeavor. With my films, I also want to give the audience joy and hope by providing them with an enjoyable, entertaining and engaging experience.

## Story

Romantic comedy was the perfect genre to incorporate the above elements, and thus I began to develop our film script. The story follows Hiroshi, a perpetual supporting actor, who is both marginalized at home and at work. While his father Kenta is a successful and famous playwright, popular even with nurses at a hospital where he is temporarily admitted, Hiroshi is a veteran minor actor who nobody seems to notice. If anything, he is constantly mistaken for insignificant sales clerks, policemen and even a kidnapper.

One day, luck changes. Hiroshi meets his muse, Aya, an aspiring young actress. Aya sees Hiroshi for who he is and praises his acting talent. She tells him that the reason Hiroshi gets mistaken for other people is because he is a good actor. Inspired by Aya, Hiroshi tries to land the role of his dreams, to play the lead in a Woody Allen remake, while he simultaneously attempts to court Aya.

Feeling out of touch with the dating scene, and needing to learn

how to master the new mode of communications such as text-messaging on cell-phones, Hiroshi solicits help from his younger colleague Tomo, who gives Hiroshi tips on dating. Hiroshi falls for Aya, but it all becomes complicated when Aya turns out to be an avid fan of Kenta's plays and auditions for a role in his new play. Discovering Aya and Kenta meeting without his knowledge, Hiroshi becomes suspicious and ends up picking fights with both Aya and his father.

Hiroshi's predicament is not only on the romantic front. His appearance in the Woody Allen remake is cancelled because he is mistaken for the man having an affair with Toshiko, wife of an MP. Toshiko, who is abused by her MP husband, finds genuine love and solace in her affair with younger cyclist Masaru. Everything goes downhill for Hiroshi. He hits rock bottom until he gradually begins to understand more about "love" and slowly starts to change.

## Portrayal of Father-Son

Much of the humorous father-son interplay has universal resonance. The father's frustration with his son's lack of success, his lack of a spouse, the son's resentment towards his father and each of them caring for each other but not being able to say it in the right way at the right moments. I remember laughing when I watched the film *"In the Name of the Father"* (1993), where a wrongly accused man played by Daniel Day-Lewis is scolded by his father for consorting with the IRA – the scene's irony and humor are heightened because it takes place in prison in front of a real IRA gunman. Many of the dialogues between Hiroshi and Kenta in our film *"Cast me if you can"* are taken almost directly from my comical banters with my own father.

## Portrayal of Age

In *"Cast me if you can,"* the elderly father is not portrayed as a pathetic marginalized appendage, but as a charming charismatic character, just as in *"Eternally Yours,"* in which the seemingly senile elderly lady surprises the audience with her wit. Film being a powerful artistic medium, it is especially important to use it wisely so that social prejudice or preconceptions against the elderly, as well as any other group of people, are questioned and dispelled.

In Japan, I find "age-ism" to be a major problem. It is so ingrained into the culture that even the honorifics that one uses when speaking differ according to one's exact age. Having grown up in the United States from age 13 to 22, I remember being shocked when I later returned to Japan and began to work for a Japanese company and everyone wanted to know your exact birth date so they would know how to speak to you. This might be an insignificant comical point, but it is a major issue when people cannot get employed, change careers or marry after a certain age. It puts an extra, unnecessary psychological burden on everyone. As a statement against such "age-ism," in our film we purposely have couples of very contrasting ages – Hiroshi, the protagonist, is 43 while Aya is 32. Toshiko, the MP's wife, is 49, but her lover Masaru is 23. But unlike what is commonly portrayed in Japan as an illicit, impure affair between two people of very different ages, both of these relationships are portrayed as true romances.

## Production of *"Cast me if you can"*

In the production of *"Cast me if you can,"* there was also a wide variety in terms of age and experience of the crew and, somehow, despite our differences, we all managed to work together to make this film.

Photo: 2010 Dream On Productions



Actress Hiromi NAGASAKU and actor Toru MASUOKA

Through the screening of my previous film *“Eternally Yours”* at the prestigious New Directors/New Films Festival in New York, co-hosted by MoMA and Lincoln Center, I met Balázs Nyari, president of New York film restoration company Cineric, and his son Eric, who both came on board as an executive producer and a producer on *“Cast me if you can.”*

Through the Tokyo International Film Festival, we met Eriko Miyagawa, who, despite her young age, had worked on *“Kill Bill: Vol. 1,” “Lost in Translation”* and *“Babel,”* and who also came on board as a producer. In developing our script further, expert British script consultant Stephen Cleary and co-writer Akane Shiratori, a 50-year veteran of the Japanese film industry, came on board.

By early March 2009, our script was developed to its 15th draft, both in English and Japanese, and within a few weeks, renowned Japanese actors Toru Masuoka, Hiromi Nagasaki, Masahiko Tsugawa and Keiko Matsuzaka all came on board to act in *“Cast me if you can.”*

With a well-known cast on board, we held a number of screening events for my previous film *“Eternally Yours”* to begin raising funding to produce *“Cast me if you can.”* Yukimori Akanoma, chairman of the board of Japan for UNHCR, Kazi Kuwahara, formerly president of Harvard Forum in Japan, and Engin Yenidunya, the young president of the Yale Club Japan, all came on board as associate producers and helped us with fund-raising. Art Front Gallery, which had commissioned me for *“Eternally Yours”* in 2006 for their Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, organized a screening event. Akanoma invited us to do a presentation at his Rotary Club; Yenidunya organized a joint event with the Harvard Club and invited me to give a presentation to their alumni. Kuwahara helped us set up our own company and advised us on the structure for film investment, while securing for us a qualified institutional investor, Takaaki Kawashima, of Kaleido Holdings, who in turn secured us further investors. With help from Raymond Ressay, my Harvard roommate, an investment banker and former lawyer, our film investment contracts were prepared in consultation with a Japanese notary. In the end, senior alumni of Ivy-league schools, younger foreign bankers and expats living in Japan, presidents of various Japanese companies and supporters of my previous works were among the more than 20 individuals who came on board as investors to support the project. This was made possible also

because the script appealed to people of a wide range of ages and the actors were universally known and respected in Japan.

In terms of the crew, we had a mix of both seasoned veterans and young talents. Among the veterans were renowned Director of Photography Yuichi Nagata JSC, who had shot more than 110 feature films, including *“Waterboys,”* and Nana Kozakai, a 35-year veteran key makeup artist in the Japanese film industry, who was instrumental in securing veteran actress Matsuzaka to act in our film, as well as seasoned editor Masahiro Onaga, who specializes in action, horror and comedy films. Co-producer Yohichi Sakurai, who was also the art director in my previous film, designed our playful Japanese title logo, and using that design as a starting point, young talented Dutch designer Karim Cherif and Lian Aelmans at United 135 in the Netherlands designed and created the sweet and elegant animations for our opening sequence and end-roll credits, which won the Best Title Sequence Award in Los Angeles. Our film music, awarded Best Original Score in Los Angeles, was composed by Jessica de Rooij, a young talented film composer who had composed music for 15 films in Hollywood in the past three years, while her younger brother Jacques wrote and sang the songs used in our film.

### Screenings of *“Cast me if you can”*

Having famous Japanese actors such as Masuoka, Nagasaki, Tsugawa and Matsuzaka, star in our film also allowed the audience to become drawn into these characters more easily and deeply. By having stars of different ages, our film has drawn audience of different age groups. Older audience members are most familiar with Tsugawa, while younger generations might be fans of Nagasaki.

Not only by the choice of actors, but also in terms of the film’s content, our film appeals to a wide range of viewers from the elderly to children. Even though we did not conceive it as a film specifically targeted to the elderly or to children, the fact that it is a lighthearted film appealing to a wide range of generations allows people to go and watch it together with their family members, not only with their spouses or lovers but even with their grandchildren or grandparents. How often do we hear about such films that we can all go to and enjoy with our extended family?

I have spoken with such a wide range of people, from a nun in her 80s to a boy in the ninth grade, a lady who had been depressed having lost her loved one recently and a couple stricken with illness – from heads of large companies and organizations to a neighborhood electrician’s family, employees of high-tech companies and my own schoolteachers, who all genuinely expressed their joy watching our film – and learned how they were touched, laughed and cried, and, in the end, came out of the cinema feeling so positively uplifted that they went back to watch the film again with their children, nieces, mothers and lovers. Our film, developed bilingually, clearly transcends national boundaries, but it also seems to have made some contribution, however miniscule, to bringing joy and laughter and bridging the generations in our aging society. **J.S**

*Atsushi Ogata is a film director. Born in Japan, Ogata graduated from Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His latest comedy feature “Cast me if you can” was presented at festivals in Shanghai, California, New York, Indiana and India, and has been released theatrically in Japan and San Francisco and on DVD.*