

# Living the Japanese Dream

By Régis ARNAUD



Author Régis Arnaud

I am a cinephile, but I would never have dreamed of producing a feature film. Not in my home country, France, and of course not in a foreign country. Yet Japan allowed me to do just that. Japan is supposed to be a hard-to-crack, slow-to-decide market. But in less than a year a beginner like me found \$1 million, hired the best technicians and actors in Japan, and had a movie shot, edited and distributed globally. I am convinced that my journey could not have happened in any other country. I am also convinced that what people see as hurdles to doing business in Japan are also fantastic opportunities for outsiders.

## The Decadence of Japanese Cinema

Any foreigner or, for that matter, any Japanese who is slightly interested in cinema will complain about the poor state of Japan's contemporary cinema. As in most countries, the old masters of Japanese cinema (Akira Kurosawa, Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi, Mikio Naruse) did not have heirs. There are now about 17 movies released each week in Japan, yet I hardly find one interesting movie every six months out of this profusion. Japanese movie theaters have become huge television screens, where big hits are just extended versions of cheap TV series. The Tokyo International Film Festival, with its ridiculous green carpet and its cheap competition, is the joke of the industry. The irony is that despite this bad quality, Japanese studios enjoy good sales year after year. But these may be their last good years. The Japanese audience is shrinking because of demographic changes, but studios have no international strategy whatsoever. Cinema is one of the most domestic industries of Japan.

The scale of Japan's cinema decadence is truly impressive. Before, the influence of Japanese cinema over the rest of the world was as deep as the influence of American cinema. Without Akira Kurosawa, there would have been no *Star Wars*: the whole story comes from *Kakushi Toride no San Akunin*, *Tsubaki Sanjuro* and *Yojimbo*. Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, the most trendy movie of recent years, owes everything to Kinji Fukasaku and Japanese cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite this glorious history, cinema is not respected as an art form in Japan. If Japanese filmmakers want some social recognition, they usually find it abroad. Akira Kurosawa always joked that he was treated like a king in Hollywood, but like a homeless person in Japan. When he went to the Oscars, he was introduced by no lesser luminaries than Steven Spielberg, George Lucas

and Francis Ford Coppola, three of the most successful movie directors in history. In his home country, he was barely respected. More recently, Beat Takeshi had to win a Golden Lion in Venice to finally receive critical acclaim in his own country. He is considered a genius in France. Even more recently, Kiyoshi Kurosawa and Koji Wakamatsu found in Paris and Berlin the recognition they do not have in Tokyo.

I thought my usefulness in this situation could be to bridge the gap between Japan's great artists and the love and interest foreigners have for Japan. In 2007, I produced a French play, *Deguchinashi*, at the magnificent Tessenkai Noh Theater in Aoyama. This little-known stage is one of the most beautiful I have ever seen. As I expected, French actors from Comédie-Française, the French national theater, agreed to come to perform in Tokyo without hesitation. "You don't have to pay me. To play in Japan is already a reward," one of them said to me. The five performances were sold out. After that, I looked for a bigger project.

## Living the Japanese Dream

Two years ago, I met a foreign director with a Japanese dream. Amir Naderi is one of the greatest Iranian filmmakers alive, and one of the leading experts in the world on Japanese cinema. He teaches Japanese cinema in American universities, and is regularly invited to universities around the world. In fact, he is the best ambassador for Japanese cinema I have ever known. Of course, he does not get any support from the Japanese authorities. Japan wants to promote its soft power, but the authorities never use foreigners in the way they could.

Amir Naderi had been working on a movie called *Cut* with Hidetoshi Nishijima for seven years, and had already written a story



Takashi Sasano (left)



Photos: Tetsugo Hyakutake (2010)



Shun Sugata



Hidetoshi Nishijima (left) and Amir Naderi (right)

with the great Japanese director Shinji Aoyama. *Cut* tells the story of a young aspiring filmmaker, Shuji, who must refund his brother's debt to the *yakuza* while trying to finance his own movie. It is a movie about the decadence of cinema as an art form, and of Japanese cinema in particular. Amir Naderi was looking for financing. I jumped in.

The poor state of Japanese cinema could have discouraged us. Instead, it gave me and my co-producers Engin Yenidunya and Eric Nyari tremendous energy. We met hundreds of people who shared our bitter assessment of contemporary Japanese cinema and our enthusiasm to do something about it. We devised a scheme whereby people could invest in *Cut* by buying "shares" in the movie in advance. After a few months, we had collected several hundred thousand dollars. At the same time, on the creative side, we found people very open to our project. Star actress Takako Tokiwa accepted the very challenging leading female part. She agreed to cut her hair and work without makeup. It may sound like a small step but for such a star these are heavy decisions. Other great artists such as Takashi Sasano and Shun Sugata immediately joined us. On the staff side, we got the best technicians in Japan. I think everybody on the Japanese side saw our project as a rare opportunity to do something different from their routine, to create something that could be shown abroad. We were one of the few players in the industry that could offer them a shot at prestigious films festivals abroad like Venice or Cannes.



Takako Tokiwa

### Learning to Play Japanese

We shot most of the movie in a warehouse in Hashimoto, on the outskirts of Tokyo. The rest was shot in Tokyo, despite the huge hindrance of the Tokyo Metropolitan police. Foreign and Japanese production companies always complain of the police, who are basically reluctant to allow any shooting. It is the main reason why movies rarely show a city as cinematic as Tokyo.

The movie was carried all the way through by the fantastic Japanese crew. Labor costs in Japan are obviously high compared to world standards. But the dedication Japanese technicians put into their work compared to, say, French technicians is so amazing that it is, in the end, cheaper to shoot in Tokyo than in Paris. When I first saw the list of expenses, I strongly complained to the set manager that four meals were

being provided every day to the crew: breakfast, lunch, dinner, and supper. It sounded too much to me. Then I came to the set. I asked a technician: "What time did you arrive this morning?" "6:30 a.m., like everybody else," he replied. "What time will you leave?" "11:30 p.m., like everybody else." I apologized to the set manager and reinstated the four-meals rule. I would never find people so dedicated to their work, I thought. There were times when we producers wondered whether we could find the money to pay for everything. But the crew never gave up. They themselves were driven by the passion of director Amir Naderi himself, for whom this was the movie of his life. He could finally pay his tribute to the Japanese cinema he cherished. I have never seen a man so dedicated to his work. One

anecdote is telling of this dedication: Amir Naderi was locked in his room incommunicado during the whole spring of 2011 for editing. He did not know whether it was day or night. He had no access to news during that whole spring. When he came out of the editing room in mid-April, he looked like a hermit coming out of a cave. He did experience the March 11 earthquake, like everybody else, when his apartment shook. But he did not know there had been a nuclear accident at Fukushima. At the time, he was probably the only person in Japan not to know.

### Representing Japan Abroad

The film was shown at the Venice film festival, one of the three majors film festivals (with Cannes and Berlin), on Sept. 2, 2011. I flew there with Hidetoshi Nishijima, Takako Tokiwa and my co-producers. Incidentally, it was also my honeymoon, so I took my family as well. Since then, the movie has been released in Japan and is currently at the end of its run. I have flown to Busan, Moscow, and Istanbul to introduce the movie at international festivals. As I write these lines, in early May, the movie is being shown at Tribeca, New York's top film festival. Most investors have had so much fun producing the movie that they assured me they will follow me again even if they lose money this time. So what are you waiting for? Come and invest in Japan. **JS**

*Régis Arnaud is the founder of production company Tokyo Story, which aims to bridge the gap between Japanese and foreign performers. He is Japan correspondent for French newspaper Le Figaro and editor-in-chief of France Japon Eco, as well as a regular contributor at Newsweek Japan and author of various reports for private clients.*