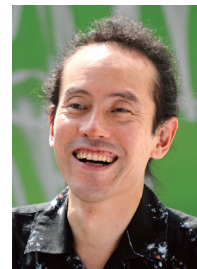


# Crossing Borders with Comedies

By Atsushi Ogata



Author Atsushi Ogata

When our romantic comedy *Cast Me If You Can* (Japanese title *Wakiyaku Monogatari*) was screened at theaters in Japan during its release in 2010-2011, some members of the audience asked me whether I had created this film with a “foreign” audience in mind. Similarly, after one of our screenings in Los Angeles, an American film director asked me about our film’s comedic sensibility and told me that he thought it worked also for an American audience.

Having grown up in London, Tokyo, New York, and Boston, and having also lived a third of my life in the Netherlands and Germany as an adult, I’m not sure what I should consider “foreign”. Regardless of the country I was in, somehow I always found myself making people laugh, often without intending to do so. For example, I would tell people what a bad day I had, or I would recount my odd experiences of being mistaken for other people — a Peruvian runaway, a Chinese deliveryman, a Swiss gas station attendant, a Kinko’s employee — and people would laugh. My odd encounters and experiences around the globe shaped my comedic sensibility. Through an unconscious trial and error process, I must have picked up on what people universally found funny, whether it be situational, relational, self-deprecating, or quirky.

## Distributing *Cast Me If You Can* Overseas

On Jan. 24, 2012, *Cast Me If You Can* was released on DVD in North America. I spent four months promoting the release through various media, including Japanese language publications based in the United States and Canada. I gave interviews for numerous papers covering New York, Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay area, Toronto, Vancouver, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Georgia, Tennessee, Minnesota, Alabama, North and South Carolina, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri and Texas. It astonished me to discover that there were so many Japanese readers in such vastly different areas. The circulations varied from a few thousand to about 50,000 in the larger cities.

To further promote our North American release through Amazon and iTunes, we organized additional screening events in Los Angeles,

the San Francisco Bay area and Texas. At the University of Southern California our film was screened as part of its Cinematheque108 series for foreign, experimental and documentary films. Professor Akira Mizuta Lippit, chair of Critical Studies, interviewed our producer Eriko Miyagawa and me. Our film was also invited for screening at the Japan Foundation Los Angeles’ new space in the Miracle Mile, for the launching its “Japanema” Japan Cinema series. The Japan Society of Northern California screened our film and invited me to participate in a panel discussion as part of its annual Year Ahead program series sponsored by Union Bank. At the Orinda Theater in the East Bay, the director of the California Independent Film Festival, which had awarded our lead actress Hiromi Nagasaku with the Best Actress Award for our film in 2011, also invited us to screen it and give a Q&A session. Through help and support from the National Association of Japan-America Societies, Japan-America Societies in Houston, Austin and San Antonio organized a three-city tour screening of our film. I was invited to each city to introduce it, participate in Q&A sessions and chat during receptions with the audience.

What struck me was how energetically and precisely the audience reacted to the humorous beats in our film — they laughed at the right gestures, facial expressions and dialogues, even though our film was in Japanese with English subtitles. The organizers in Houston told me that they were both pleased and surprised by the high turnout and the socio-economic and racial diversity among the audience. This was exciting and encouraging for me, since this kind of universal humor is what I’d been aiming for. In San Antonio, a Japanese lady came up to me with her Latin American husband and told me how much they enjoyed watching a film that they could both share and appreciate despite their cultural and national differences. My Q&A sessions almost became like a stand-up routine. I sometimes even wondered if I needed to make a whole film or if I

Source: Dream On Productions



Writer-Director Atsushi Ogata with the Japan America Society of Houston

could just keep talking on stage to make people laugh like a comedian.

Having already made *Cast Me If You Can* a few years ago, and now spending more of my time alone, writing my next scripts in the privacy of home, I found it especially refreshing and encouraging to be receiving such direct audience feedback.

*Cast Me If You Can* was also screened as inflight entertainment on a number of international airlines such as Russia's Aeroflot, China Southern Airlines and Australia's Jetstar Airways. Friends and family members of our film crew excitedly told me about their experiences of boarding their flights from Moscow or the Australian Gold Coast and discovering our film on the inflight programs. Inside Japan, our film was also screened on various long-distance bus lines from Kyushu to Hokkaido. Perhaps the humorous life-affirming nature of the film was suited for travel. An acquaintance, who works at an aide agency constantly dealing with turbulent humanitarian crises, once told me that he watches comedy films exclusively during his air travels.

## Comedic Style

When I conceived *Cast Me If You Can*, I initially thought of it partly as a homage to Woody Allen. I consciously employed certain stylistic elements such as the long shot, in which two characters walk down a street, or down a staircase, chatting together. In our film, the protagonist Hiroshi, a perpetual supporting actor, and Aya, his muse, walk down a street in front of a temple when they first meet each other. Later they walk down a series of staircases near his house when he sees her off to a bus stop. Since the actors and crew were extremely skilled and experienced, we were able to get these shots within a couple of takes. The actors, having memorized complex lines, and giving the right subtexts, could deliver on cue much more than I had envisioned. I was so excited to see these scenes unfold in front of my very eyes. In the shot in front of the temple, we used a virtual dolly without any tracks, improvised by our camera crew to realize the smooth movement.

As I travelled and screened our film at different venues and got feedback, I also learned from the audience that unconsciously it had echoes of many other film directors: the pathos of Chaplin, the visual humor of Jacques Tati, the gags of Harold Lloyd. Watching Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last!* (1923), I was pleasantly surprised to find that the crouched sneaking movement Toru Masuoka (playing Hiroshi) performs during our Hula dance scene was quite similar and as humorous as the crawling movement Lloyd performed in the department store scene in which he tries to hide from someone. In our film, when we were rehearsing the scene, Masuoka was the one who suggested to me that he could crouch down and sneak up across the room. I had not expected this six-foot-tall actor to crouch down so small to half his size, like a little "humpty dumpty" in an almost egg-like shape. It was totally captivating and hilarious. So I decided that he should play the scene that way.

Comedy is often derivative. In *Cast Me If You Can*, we have a scene that ends with a tennis ball hitting Tomo, Hiroshi's sidekick, on the head. In Jacques Tati's *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* (1953), one can see a similar physical gag with a tennis ball, but I only watched Tati's film after making my own.

Source: Dream On Productions



Writer-Director Atsushi Ogata at the Japan Foundation, Los Angeles

Audiences often react to situations and laugh when they can insert themselves into the situation. In the Hollywood romantic comedy *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), written by Nora Ephron, there is a scene in which Meg Ryan, playing Sally, loudly fakes an orgasm in a restaurant. The biggest laugh comes when another female customer in the diner tells the waitress, "I'll have what she's having." The line itself is funny, but audiences react because they can relate to the customer's perspective.

## Humor in *Cast Me If You Can*

When audiences identify with characters it enhances the comedy. I noticed that the audience laughed loudly when Hiroshi makes a very embarrassed facial expression after his father cheers towards Aya performing on stage in her play. Everyone could relate to the son's discomfort in such a situation.

One of the earliest scenes in our film, at which people everywhere laugh out loud, is the cafe scene in which Hiroshi takes off his now unused wedding ring from his former marriage and offers it to his sidekick Tomo, who has lost his engagement ring. Hiroshi offers the ring to Tomo insistently. It almost looks as if he is forcing his wedding vows onto Tomo. To make the scene even funnier, I added a couple of extras in the background. When one of them notices what's happening, she alerts her companion, who turns around and also watches the exchange in bewilderment. This is where the audience gives the biggest laugh, because viewers identify with the stupefied couple watching the odd exchange.

Physical gags such as the ones involving temperamental vending machines also travel well across cultures. I noticed especially in Shanghai, where our film premiered, that the audience laughed loudly when beverage cans came out of vending machines only when Aya kicked them, but not when Hiroshi tried.

Another physical gag was suggested by our lead actor for the scene in a park when he receives a text message from Aya inviting him to a play in which she is performing. The stage direction in the script specified that Masuoka "skips along happily out of the park". When we first blocked and rehearsed it, he skipped out of the park in a conventional way. Then he gave me an alternative suggestion for "skipping". It was oddly amusing and comical, but it didn't exactly

“read” as “skipping”. So the solution I came up with was to combine the two options. First, upon reading Aya’s invitation, he would skip in a conventional way, but then switch to his quirky “skipping” movements as he exited the park. The combined result worked fabulously, and we got laughs from the audience.

The odd incongruity between Hiroshi and Aya is also a source of humor. Karen Davis, senior programmer at the Mill Valley Film Festival, writes: “*Cast Me If You Can* is a thoroughly enjoyable love story between two unlikely characters whose ‘oil and water’ relationship brings together a ‘glass half empty’ out-of-luck actor and a ‘glass half full’ aspiring young actress in a memorable mix brimming over with charm.” As in classical romantic comedies, the humor often arises from the contrast and dynamics between the bold and assertive female lead and the awkward and gentle male lead.

The father-son relationship, between the not-so-successful son Hiroshi and his famous playwright father Kenta, is another source of humor, which I wrote about in my last article for *JAPAN SPOTLIGHT* (“*Cast Me If You Can* — Romantic Comedy Bridging Generations”, March/April 2011). So the humor that I’ve weaved into this film can be physical, situational, relational or emotional. It doesn’t really require extensive knowledge or references to a particular culture or subculture. That’s also one reason it works universally, across cultures, as we layered different types of comedic elements, ranging from physical slapstick to witty dialogue.

Through screening our film and getting feedback internationally from audiences and film experts, I became more conscious of my creative filmmaking process. So I’ve incorporated their insights into my subsequent projects. After garnering support of star actors in Japan, who are of the caliber of Cary Grant or Meryl Streep, in realizing *Cast Me If You Can*, I felt that my next goal should not be to repeat myself by creating a sequel, but to broaden my horizon and to face a more ambitious challenge.

### *Play Me Again Sam*

Having spent two-thirds of my life outside Japan, watching mainly American films in my teens, it didn’t feel natural for me to make my next film again in Japan, at least from a creative stand point. I moved my base to Los Angeles and continued to work on more English-language comedic scripts, which take place mainly in the US. Inspired by such films as Neil Jordan’s *The Good Thief* (2002), with



*Cast Me If You Can* at Rice University, Houston, Texas (Japan-America Society of Houston)

Nick Nolte playing an ex-pat ex-con in the south of France, I conceived *Play Me Again Sam*, a romantic caper comedy full of visual humor and an intriguing character study about Sam, a female con artist with a heart of gold.

In this story, to help pay for heart surgery for her sidekick, Sam, a Robin Hood con artist, disguises herself and tries to fleece her classmates at a college reunion, but her plans go haywire when she meets her romantic match. Having watched so many films with male protagonists, and having already written a strong female lead in *Cast Me If You Can*, I couldn’t resist the temptation to make the protagonist female. Rather than focusing on her sexuality or portraying her as some kind of weak victim, I wanted to portray her as strong, charismatic and likeable while being quirky and flawed at the same time.

Having already made my comedy feature debut with *Cast Me If You Can* and subsequently becoming more conscious of my own sensibility through studying the masters of comedy and consulting with my filmmaker friend Sian Evans, I wanted to integrate a lot of the physical humor and other comedic elements already during the screenwriting stage. Through a tableau of actors and settings, I employ physical and whimsical comedy in a “madcap” approach, combining stylistic elements of Robert Altman and Preston Sturges, as well as Tati, Chaplin and Woody Allen. The result is both a modern-day screwball comedy and a deeper emotional story about marginalized lonely characters making connections.

I once heard Ang Lee speak at a festival. He talked about how he viewed film as a way of allowing one to reveal one’s own secrets, while covering them up and re-presenting them. Perhaps there are traces of that in my projects too. This film idea also originates from my personal experience — living as an expat, outsider, foreigner artist in poorer immigrant areas of European cities, returning to my Ivy college reunion, reconnecting with my past. The film also then goes much further beyond my own experiences.

### *No Way Sweet Pea*

I have also developed another project: *No Way Sweet Pea*. The story is about a gun-shy female improviser, baby-sitting a prankster



Karen Davis, Senior Film Programmer for the Mill Valley Film Festival, and Jonathan M Hall, Assistant Professor of Media Studies at Pomona College in Claremont, California, with Atsushi Ogata at the Japan Society of Northern California



honors student, who must overcome her inner fears when they are kidnapped together in a case of mistaken identity.

On the surface, this story is meant to be an entertaining humorous, action-packed farcical comedy with a classical three-act structure. On a deeper level, it's about marginalized odd characters making connections, discovering strengths and talents within themselves, who find/assert their place in today's divided world. The protagonists are not superheroes or heroic men. They are marginalized and timid women and children of color who, by chance, find themselves trapped in the midst of insurmountable difficulties, where they have to test their own strengths to the limit and save themselves with help from their mothers and fellow friends/clowns.

The tone of the film is predominantly lighthearted. Rather than having a film packed with realistic "talking heads", the visual and auditory motifs throughout the film act as secondary characters, creating a stylized vocabulary for the film, analogous to those of Tati or Tarantino. Comedic motifs include sneezing, name calling, umbrellas, paper airplanes, parking meter maids with bubble gum, Mary Poppins references, people in animal costumes, clowns, flying peanuts caught in the mouth, strangers on the street becoming engaged in central action, mother/children in lookalike glasses, junk food, and other pranks. Through this film, I wish to give hope and courage to people who feel marginalized, and to provide comic relief and satirical insights into the world around us.

## Galapagos

In preparing my future projects, people often ask me if and what they have to do with Japan. For me, it is narrow minded to think that way, to think that film can't be personal and universal without being pigeon-holed with a strong national identity. I find it hard to make a truly international film in Japan. Both the industry and the audience/market are too insular. For this reason, I've heard people refer to them as "Galapagos". The domestic market is big enough that most "successful" Japanese films can stay afloat by catering only to the domestic mass audience. This prevents the Japanese film industry from excelling globally. Aside from certain select horror, animation, art house and soft porn films, Japanese films tend not to be widely distributed outside Japan. Films from South Korea and China surpass them, with stronger scripts, production values and skilled internationally known casts.

Beyond film, the TV industry and VOD markets in Japan also seem dismal. While in the US top screenwriters are moving towards writing and creating sophisticated original television shows, with engaging contemporary and relevant premises and well-developed characters full of contradictions, in Japan, in contrast, new changes in the industry seems minimal.

While the market transforms dynamically also on the VOD front in North America and other parts of the world, in Japan the majority of Internet content still seems to be run by the major companies and the contents tend to be derivatives of existing TV shows. Because of the social and organizational structures and conventions, individual artistic initiatives are not encouraged to grow in this environment. This was also true when we made *Cast Me If You Can*, which we had to create totally independently. Companies have plenty of cash for publicity and promotion, but no one wants to invest in creation.

Source: Dream On Productions



Writer-Director Atsushi Ogata at the College Women's Association of Japan

An established independent Japanese distributor once told me that today in Japan only middle-aged and elderly audiences are attracted to quality "foreign" films, and if one aims for a huge domestic box office hit one has to cater towards the pop culture that insular Japanese youths are attracted to. Conversely, promoters of Japanese films abroad are discouraged by the lack of Japanese films accepted at prestigious film festivals. Still, there are some exceptions, such as Hirokazu Koreeda's *Like Father, Like Son* (2013), a dramatic film based on true stories about two families whose sons were accidentally swapped at birth due to a mistake by the hospital and how the two families came to terms with it. Spielberg bought the remake rights.

What was fascinating with our film was the unique collaboration between the skilled veterans, who normally work within the confines of the domestic Japanese market, and my global vision and sensibility. Our joint effort led *Cast Me If You Can* to transcend this "Galapagos".

## Conclusion

I don't know whether, when or which of my projects will next be realized. Some industry experts try to dissuade me from making comedies; they say "comedies don't travel." The state of the industry in general and the preferences of the mass audience are not very encouraging.

However, when I hear that audience laughter, and the enthusiastic reactions during and after the screenings, I feel all the more certain that I need to pursue my calling, no matter what shape or form it may take. By incorporating my bi-cultural upbringing and global sensibility, I am creating comedic work that can transcend borders and bring people together.

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Atsushi Ogata is a film director, screenwriter and actor. He is a graduate of Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His films and videos have been screened worldwide, including at the prestigious New Directors/New Films Festival New York at the Museum of Modern Art and at the Lincoln Center. His most recent film *Cast Me If You Can* was released in theaters in 16 cities in Japan, as well as San Francisco, and also as a DVD and digitally on Amazon and iTunes. It has been screened on airlines, festivals and television, and has been published as a novel.