

Yukata Cowboy

Adventures in New Online Cinema!



Author Atsushi Ogata

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After my experience debuting my feature film *Cast Me If You Can*, shot in 35mm film with a known Japanese cast and crew and released nationwide, I moved to Los Angeles to realize my next feature film in English. There I learned that the media landscape is rapidly changing. Audiences are shifting from cinema-viewing to VOD (video on demand), and more and more creators around the world are shifting gears to creating “web series” for online content.

My first encounter with online content was at the “Digital Frontier” panel at the Writers Guild of America. Many Hollywood screenwriters were losing film work due to the reduction in the number of theatrical films being produced. As a result they were moving into television and online content, where they could even create and release their own series without having to rely on others for approval. Since I had experience in writing, acting, directing, filming, and editing, I could jump into this arena without acquiring any new skills; I could even play multiple characters myself!

Origin of the Series

A few years ago I returned to Japan temporarily, to help out my father, who was ill. I found that in Japan, unlike the United States, Europe and South Korea, the shift to online content for filmmakers was not happening at all. Half a year later, my father passed away. I was literally stuck at home, consumed by complex paperwork. My creativity and morale were at a record low. I had to do something. It was then that filmmaker friends Sian Evans, Soraya Umewaka and writer John Amari encouraged me to start creating work for online distribution.

I realized that over many years of living all over the world, I had collected a vast number of humorous anecdotes. I had often shared these at dinner parties, festivals and other social occasions and I realized that I had a fertile body of experience upon which to draw. First I began just recording these stories on my iPhone like a vlogger or a stand-up comedian. Then my friends suggested that instead of just talking to the camera, it would be better for me to enact the scenes. I began playing not only my alter ego, but also different characters I had encountered around the world — men, women, young and old, of different races and nationalities.

I set up my iPhone on a tripod and filmed myself from different angles so that I could later intercut the shots. I would film myself playing a menacing antagonist, framing the shot dramatically from below. Playing a scared protagonist, I would film myself as a supplicant, framed from a higher position.



Photo: © Globetrot Productions 2015
“I’m fed up! I’m fed up! I’m totally fed up!” (Still from Yukata Cowboy by Atsushi Ogata)

At my parents’ house, I found a vast range of clothes and items from around the world that could become costumes and props. After filming, I would immediately start editing. If I needed another shot or a missing text, I could easily reshoot and improve my edits.

Format

Unlike feature films or TV, where the language and structure are quite rigidly established, with online content one can still explore and create one’s own program formats. How do I organize the many anecdotes from my own life into a coherent series? We tried several methods, but in the end organized the stories by topics. For example, I recalled my experiences travelling on European trains. I created one video out of this through-line, containing reenactments of three such incidents: riding a train in Germany and overhearing American tourists next to me; riding a train from Budapest to Belgrade surrounded by three middle-aged Gypsy women; and sitting in a train compartment surrounded by menacing-looking German skinheads.

Another video became stories about parking cars in Los Angeles, and another about being a houseguest in New York. Other episodes compared experiences of riding elevators in different countries around the world, or different cultural mores when answering telephones. In each case, I would start with a real premise/experience as the “set up”; then change or exaggerate the story ending to arrive at some kind of punch-line or pay-off related to the topic.

With additional feedback from Robin Jones, an American theatrical director and stand-up comedian, we proceeded to make the clips more “cinematic”. Instead of having long stretches where I was just talking directly to the camera, I used voiceovers and incorporated “B-roll” drawn from enacted scenes, archival footage and photographs from around the world.

The Character

I was beginning to build a character separate from myself — whose exploits were built on my own life, but whose adventures coalesced around the theme of cross-cultural observations — being a stranger in a strange land. Sian suggested that I develop costumes



Photo: © Globetrot Productions 2015
"How Much Respect I Gotta Pay Before I Get Paid Back?!" (Still from *Yukata Cowboy* with footage from earlier work)

and a visual motif for the main character and "I" voice of the narrator, to visually express and enhance this theme. I looked around my room and saw a few cowboy hats. I had been a fan of Spaghetti Westerns when I was in high school in New York. As a young boy, I used to watch Clint Eastwood's *Fistful of Dollars* series and imitated the "Man with No Name" all the time. I even attended a Western-style horseback riding camp in the Catskill Mountains one summer, where I also learned to lasso.

Another item I found in my room was a *yukata* (an informal Japanese summer robe), which I had purchased years ago for a tall Dutch actress to wear in my first short film *Champagne*. When I was a child, I had been a fan of samurai stories, especially those masterless *Ronin* who drifted from town to town, saving the locals from oppressive feudal lords or bandits, like a sort of Asian "loner-cowboy". They'd wear informal *yukata* clothes and a large straw hat while they fought off dozens of "bad guys", saving women, children and the poor. When I first moved to America at the age of 13, I wore such a straw hat and had been mistaken for a Vietnamese refugee at LAX airport.

Structure

Dressing as a cross between a Japanese samurai and a Western gunslinger, I began to "host" my own series, talking about my experiences of trying to adapt to life in New York, Tokyo, and Amsterdam. Learning from trial and error, I purchased a lavalier microphone and small professional light to improve the production quality. I also began asking friends in different cities, such as Boston and London, to take still pictures and email them to me, so that I could incorporate those cityscapes without having to fly there myself. I dug up old video footage and home movies and began editing them into my series.

While living in Amsterdam, I was commissioned to make a video with the theme "Typically Dutch". Four non-Dutch video artists were asked to create videos about living in Holland. My contribution was a pseudo-educational video called "The Dutch Touch". Dressed in a suit and wearing a necktie with Dutch tulip patterns, I'd given "lessons" on how to live in Holland — how to ride on the back of someone else's bicycle or how to kiss three times as is customary in Holland. Subsequently, I made similar videos in New York and Tokyo. In *Yukata Cowboy*, I expanded on these earlier works, and ultimately incorporated different parts of these earlier pieces.

Putting It All Together

With Sian and Robin's feedback, archival material and new photos from friends around the world, I finished filming and most of the editing by late November 2014. At that point we began to develop the opening sequence, music and social media needed to introduce our character, *Yukata Cowboy*. Web series are short and concentrated, and we knew we needed to immediately and succinctly outline our themes revolving around the disorientation of being a "global citizen" living between many cultures, and the humorous, whimsical attitude of *Yukata Cowboy* himself. Pascal Plantinga, a Dutch musician friend with whom I had worked on previous projects, creates rather playful songs. His song "Niminy Piminy" was perfect for *Yukata Cowboy*.

For animation, I turned to Karim Cherif, a talented Dutch designer, who had created the open animation sequences for my last three narrative films. Karim came up with a brilliant animation clip in which a Japanese landscape suddenly turns into a desert-like landscape from America's South-West.

Then Ben Hillman, an amazing designer and filmmaker who has also created animation for Spike Lee, came on board. He designed our "brand" — an impressive logo with brushstrokes, integrating the cowboy and samurai motifs. Ben



Photo: © Globetrot Productions 2015
Yukata Cowboy title design (by Ben Hillman & Company)

animated this brushstroke character for the opening animation, combining it with Karim's background images. He set the color schemes and font designs and designed the inter-titles and end roll credits, so that we'd have a consistent look throughout. Ben gave directions for me to work with a lasso in live action, so that he could incorporate live images of *Yukata Cowboy* for the end roll credits. He also designed all the variations of the brush stroke character for our social media, postcards, posters and T-shirts. Ben also worked on our trailer with Sian and Bandy, a Japanese YouTube filmmaker/editor, who spent a long day with me, filming *Yukata Cowboy* all over Tokyo.

Releasing Online

Since this series was intended primarily for online viewing, we needed to secure domain names for our website and social media. Sian, Robin, Ben and I brainstormed title ideas, and we conducted focus group testing of the best candidate names among friends and colleagues. Some names were too close to films being released; others, it emerged from the focus group, were misleading. Some worked in one language, but not in another. At one point, we had separate titles for English and Japanese. I created my own bilingual website and began tweeting in both languages. I began to notice the Japanese title, *Yukata Cowboy*, showing up on top of the search engines, while a longer English title did not rise to the first page.

As Ben worked on the title page, we realized that our "Japanese" title was looking more promising — it was clearly more unique than the English version. I was concerned about using a Japanese word — *yukata* — for an international audience, but Ben pointed out that even "Pokemon" had become an everyday word in America. Based on these

Photo: © Globetrot Productions 2015



Yukata Cowboy with girls and Leprechaun in Dublin (Still from video by Rafael Noto)

observations, we decide to name our series *Yukata Cowboy* in both English and Japanese. The title reflected the hybrid cross-cultural aspect of our series well, and the word “cowboy” is so familiar to everyone all over the world that even in the streets of Dublin little girls run up to me calling “cowboy”!

Online Distribution

Unlike feature films, web series don't require securing a distributor or theatrical release. Anyone who creates online content can upload to various platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Dailymotion, and reach audiences around the world. This is an exciting new prospect.

Hollywood has often been criticized for lack of diversity. Films starring women and/or minorities have a much harder time getting produced. Even if such films are produced independently, and even if they have some success in the festival circuit, they often run into difficulties when trying to secure distribution and theatrical release. With the audience shifting to VOD, the “niche” markets are starting to evolve. With web series, voices previously under-represented have new opportunities. *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* started as a web series by Issa Rae, a young African-American woman, and has become very successful.

Online, it is easier to disseminate your work, but competition is fierce to get noticed. Traditional film publicity relies on advertising and reviews, but for online content such as web series one needs to make effective use of social media to attract viewers.

Publicity & Social Media

The publicity for our previous feature *Cast Me If You Can* was based primarily on traditional methods, using mainstream media channels such as papers and magazines, and was focused on the domestic Japanese market. With *Yukata Cowboy* I had the chance to reconsider this publicity model and develop a promotional campaign more focused on social media — something I could do efficiently by myself and a small team.

I took a course on publicizing web series, while also learning basic social media tools such as Twitter, Instagram and Vine. I realized that images — stills and moving — are the mainstay of social media; I needed a lot more publicity photos for *Yukata Cowboy* than one might require for traditional film publicity. Since the filming for *Yukata Cowboy* was mostly done inside my house, with myself or a one-person crew, I had few production stills.

In Los Angeles, Phil

Photo: © Globetrot Productions 2015



Yukata Cowboy and Tinker Bell amongst the stars, Hollywood Walk of Fame, CA (Photo by Phil Hughes)

Hughes, a USC film school graduate who also works as a photographer, came on board. We spent a day filming more than 1,300 Yukata Cowboy images in Griffith Park, Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Santa Monica and Silver Lake. In Hollywood, many street performers dress up as Superman, Marilyn Monroe, Tinker Bell, Chewbacca, etc. Everyone was so used to seeing existing Disney and other brand characters that the thought of an original character seemed foreign. Tinker Bell came up to me and asked me which character I was playing!

Even in Los Angeles, you rarely see anyone in cowboy hats, or Japanese *yukata*. You certainly never see anyone with a lasso. In Beverly Hills I began swinging my authentic lasso on Rodeo Drive. An SUV pulled up and stopped. The ladies inside began asking me what I was doing. A tourist bus went by and everyone began snapping photos. On the beach at Santa Monica, where families of various cultures were swimming and sunbathing, I walked by twirling my lasso. A man ran up and asked to take a selfie with me. In Silver Lake and Echo Park I posed alongside graffiti, sometimes imitating the poses. Phil captured them all, and we created a store of photos — “ammunition” for the upcoming social media campaign.

For *Yukata Cowboy*, unlike the campaign for my feature film *Cast Me If You Can*, I was doing all the publicity myself. I was posting photos on Facebook, etc., but it was becoming clear that I needed a more comprehensive strategy and assistance — there simply wasn't enough time in the day for me to create, release and publicize. Securing a social media outreach coordinator who could handle such a task was complex — *Yukata Cowboy* is firmly planted in both English and Japanese-speaking cultures, as well as various European languages. Even for my private posts on Facebook, I had been using both English and Japanese to contact my many friends, colleagues and acquaintances, inside and outside of Japan.

Fortunately, in Los Angeles we found a Japanese-English dual-language social media coordinator, Arika Yanaka. She had experience in social media both for small independent films and on large budget commercials. Arika initially did research on the “niche” markets so that we could understand to whom *Yukata Cowboy* might appeal and where our humor would fit in, and continued to strategize with me about how best to release the episodes and the promotional materials around the shows. Arika took over the posting of text, stills and videos I prepared, contacted influencers and did follow-up online.

Japanese Subtitles

The issue of dual language was not only limited to publicity. Although *Yukata Cowboy* was created originally in English for a world audience, our Japanese audience needed Japanese versions of the clips. First, I did a test with voiceovers, screening them with a couple of Japanese creators who were not fluent in English. Their feedback was unanimously negative for reasons I didn't quite fathom, so I removed my Japanese voiceover and added Japanese subtitles instead. To my surprise, the same people now reacted to the same clips positively. It was clear that *Yukata Cowboy* needed to be subtitled in Japanese.

Japanese characters are complex and Japanese-speaking audiences are accustomed to a high level of technical quality. Creating sophisticated Japanese subtitles that would be easy to understand and clearly readable even on mobile devices, required skills and amounts of work beyond what I could manage on my own. There was also an

added audio complication — I found that some of the iPhone-recorded clips had sync problems, the alignment between the sound and image, due to the version of the iPhone I used. Fortunately, my assistant director Orié Fukushi and editor Miki Inagawa, both of whom had worked on my earlier short film *Eternally Yours*, offered to help. While Orié adjusted my Japanese translation for subtitle use, Miki fixed all the sync problems and added the newly prepared Japanese subtitles.

Festivals

In the meantime, I developed plans to submit *Yukata Cowboy* to a number of the new generation of “film festivals” devoted exclusively to “films” premiering as online content. In the spring of 2015, at the LA Webfest, I met festival directors from all over the world. More than half of these directors were launching their web festivals for the first time later in the year and were looking for new work. In early summer, when we finally had the seven episodes for the first “Season” of *Yukata Cowboy* completed, I began entering the show to these festivals.

Yukata Cowboy, along with my previous online series *Trick or Treat: I LOVE America!* (a collaboration with popular Japanese YouTuber MEGWIN TV and American actor Bob Werley), was accepted at web festivals in Sicily, Miami, Bilbao, Rio de Janeiro, Dublin, Rome, and Toronto, and invited to film festivals in Rotterdam and Geneva.

In Holland and other parts of Europe there is a tradition of screening short films before features. At the Camera Japan Festival in Rotterdam, Alex Oost, the director, proposed to screen the first seven episodes of *Yukata Cowboy* before different feature films. For example, he screened our episode about “bicycles” before a feature film that had a lot of bicycles in it. Converting the episodes to DCP format, *Yukata Cowboy* was screened 14 times. I went up on stage, dressed as Yukata Cowboy to introduce it each time. The festival, being in its 10th year, had a loyal following and we had good turnout for every screening. One lady told me she saw me four times on stage in one day!?

In Sicily, the festival took place on the small island of Ustica. There, I met Joël Bassaget, founder and editor-in-chief of Web Series Mag, a



Photo: © Globetrot Productions 2015
Winning Special Mention for Outstanding Performance as an Actor, Sicily Web Fest, Italy. (Photo by David Borja, with Joël Bassaget, Miroslav Elle)

digital section of the French paper *Liberation*. Joël reviewed TV shows, before starting to review web series regularly for the last three years. He interviewed me extensively and helped with a little filming I did on location in Sicily. As a member of the jury, he also gave me a prize: **Special Mention for Outstanding Performance as an Actor**. Our series went on to win more prizes: Best Creative Concept in Miami, Best Character (Amets Section) and Web Series Mag Interview Award in Bilbao and Best Sketch Comedy in Dublin.

In addition to screening and networking, attending these new festivals provided opportunities for publicity. In Rotterdam, Anna Hotard, an American exchange student and festival volunteer, spent half a day filming me as Yukata Cowboy through the city. At the outdoor market, I heard someone shouting “Cowboy! John Wayne!” — it was a man selling fish at the market. I went over to him and showed him my lasso. He took it, tied it around his neck and began to jokingly strangle

himself! Later, I posted that photograph on Facebook; the fish vendor found it and also became our fan! In Bilbao, the festival photographer Laurent Leger took photographs of me next to the Bilbao Guggenheim and on a bridge, lassoing passing Spanish girls. In Dublin the festival videographer Rafael Noto filmed Yukata Cowboy swinging his lasso on the streets in the Temple Bar area and meeting a man dressed as a leprechaun! How ironic that a series created in my house about my misadventures in different countries led to further new misadventures abroad! I subsequently made more clips from these incidents and posted them online.



Photo: © Globetrot Productions 2015
“Don’t Strangle Me, John Wayne!” (Vishandel de Zeemeermin, Rotterdam, The Netherlands) (Photo by Anna Hotard)



Photo: © Globetrot Productions 2015
Lost in Bilbao: Legend of A Japanese Cowboy, Bilbao Web Fest, Spain (Photo by Laurent Leger)

Future Directions

This semi-autobiographical series not only explores humor that is universal, it also reflects on our contemporary “new” world, where many people are living across national and cultural boundaries. By viewing “culture shock” from a comedic perspective, *Yukata Cowboy* encourages viewers to look around their own daily lives, and perhaps notice, for example, how elevator etiquette might differ from one country to the next.

In Japan, Asako Otomo, editor at Yugakusha Publishing, has turned *Yukata Cowboy* into a book, in English and Japanese, which can be used both for cultural studies and as a language learning tool. In addition to online viewing, Tollywood, an independent cinema in a hip area of Tokyo, has theatrically released the entire four seasons, along with my previous shorts and feature.

Currently, I’m developing feature and web series scripts, in which we can see Yukata Cowboy in longer narrative stories, visiting different countries and getting involved with local residents, as in some contemporary versions of Spaghetti Westerns or samurai films, except he’ll be using his Woody Allen-esque wits and charm rather than guns and swords.

(Yukata Cowboy episodes can be viewed online at <http://yukatacowboy.com/>)

J.S

Atsushi Ogata is a graduate of Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His films and videos have been screened worldwide, including at the New Directors/New Films Festival New York. His last comedy feature Cast Me If You Can was released in 16 cities in Japan and San Francisco, and digitally in North America, and was screened on airlines and TV, as well as being published as a novel. His recent online series Yukata Cowboy ranked No. 12 in the Web Series World Cup 2015.