

# LOST & FOUND COWBOY - Uplifting Cross-Cultural Online Comedy in the Time of Pandemic (Part 1)

By Atsushi Ogata



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Our globetrotting romantic comedy web series *LOST & FOUND COWBOY* opens in Tokyo and travels the world on Twisted Mirror TV!  
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With the current global pandemic, our daily lives and routines have become extremely disrupted and our activities restricted. The situation can impact us all very negatively, if we don't take caution. At such challenging times, I feel the role of an artist/creator becomes even more important – to create and show work that reminds us all of the fun and joy of life. Art gives us hope.

Even before the pandemic, for a number of years I have focused on deepening cross-cultural communication and interactions through comedy – creating works that celebrate our diversity rather than building “walls” between us.

With globalization, people have been traveling routinely across borders and living in different countries from their country of origin – sometimes by choice and at other times by necessity, but at the same time there have been increasing tensions with growing prejudice and xenophobia. With the pandemic, the situation has worsened as many countries have literally closed their borders. All the more reason to create and disseminate uplifting cross-cultural comedies.

## YUKATA COWBOY

I was born in Japan and raised partly in the United States. I've lived and worked in the US, the Netherlands, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Japan as a screenwriter, film director, web series creator, video artist and an actor/comedian. For *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, I've previously written about comedy that crosses borders with my feature *CAST ME IF YOU CAN* (March/April 2014) and my online series *YUKATA COWBOY* (May/June 2016). The original *YUKATA*

*COWBOY*® is a one-man sketch comedy series based on my own fish-out-of-water experiences of growing up and living in different countries. My observational comedy turns cultural shocks into laughter.

With a cowboy hat, Japanese yukata (a casual, traditional summer garment) and rapid-fire patter, the character Yukata Cowboy drifts across the US, Japan, and Europe. He repeatedly stumbles across more than he bargains for; trying to fit in everywhere he goes.

Each episode of *YUKATA COWBOY*® is one to three minutes long (30 episodes in total) and takes the format of sketch comedy, focusing on an aspect of the everyday from the perspective of a man who travels his whole life between cultures: elevators, riding trains, bikes, travelling or making friends. In each country, Yukata Cowboy tries to learn the ropes and fit in, but the more he fits in, the more often he is mistaken for someone else. Amidst all his accommodation of perplexing newness, he struggles to find his own voice.

I play Yukata Cowboy as well as all the other characters of different ages, gender and nationality. I filmed the series myself with an iPhone. Initially, I started this series as a therapy after my father's passing, but with support from my American producer Sian Evans, Dutch composer Pascal Plantinga, and animators Karim Cherif and Ben Hillman we developed it into an online series for a worldwide audience.

*YUKATA COWBOY*® was selected for many of the new, emerging web festivals in Europe, South Korea, and North and South America. The series has been awarded 13 prizes, in Sicily, Bilbao, Miami, Rome, Dublin, Montreal, Seoul and Washington DC. *YUKATA COWBOY*® ranked #12 in the Web Series World Cup in 2015. It was screened for two weeks at a Tokyo cinema, and an offshoot English-Japanese bilingual book of interviews – *The Unofficial Guide to Yukata Cowboy* – was published.

Because of the short length and easily relatable observational comedic content, *YUKATA COWBOY* seems to resonate with different audiences around the world. I remember receiving a message from a young Swiss woman visiting Japan, who said that she was watching an episode of *YUKATA COWBOY* about taking trains in Tokyo while she was actually taking a Tokyo subway: she said she was glad her subway was not as crowded as what was shown in my episode. After screening another episode about European train travel at my college reunion in the US, an audience member came up to me and told me about his own experience of European train travel. I was happy to see how my short-form online comedic content was triggering audiences and bringing people together.

## MONA LISA COWBOY

With the success of YUKATA COWBOY®, I had a chance to realize our first spin-off series, MONA LISA COWBOY in Paris, by collaborating with Xin Wang, the creator of the hit Chinese-French web series “Ex-Model”, whom I met at the Sicily Web Fest in Italy.

MONA LISA COWBOY (seven three-minute episodes) is a dramatic comedy about how two estranged Chinese expat twins are brought together by Yukata Cowboy in Paris. The first episode tells the fictional origin story of how the street performer Yukata Cowboy came into existence after a failed Japanese misanthropic artist Kenji travels to Paris, where he meets Mona, a creative Chinese toy-store owner.

MONA LISA COWBOY premiered at Webfest Berlin in September 2017 and screened at numerous festivals worldwide. I was awarded Best Actor (Star AMETS) at Bilbao Seriesland, 2017 (Spain), and MONA LISA COWBOY was also awarded Special Jury Prize at DC Web Fest 2018 (Washington DC) and Best Costume at Asia Web Awards 2018 (South Korea).

After watching the first episode, to my surprise, a number of audience members at festival screenings asked if I had really been a street performer in Paris. Even though I had never lived in Paris and had never been an actual street performer, it was curious to see how people who were not expats were drawn to the fictional lives of these Asian expats in Paris.

Growing up in the US as a member of a racial minority, I never had a “racial role model” to look up to and emulate. My heroes were portrayed by Clint Eastwood or Al Pacino. On a similar note, Xin Wang had mentioned that, being a member of a racial minority in France, she was often cast as a gangster or a prostitute. This gave me an added incentive to create roles where Xin could play Mona, an artistic character, and her twin sister Lisa, a businesswoman. I wanted to counter racial stereotypes for the Western audience, to celebrate diversity and to portray Asian characters who were not cooks, crooks or call girls.

## LOST & FOUND COWBOY

Having successfully expanded YUKATA COWBOY® from a sketch comedy series to a narrative spin-off series in MONA LISA COWBOY, Joel Bassaget (screenwriter/advisor for Web Fest Berlin) suggested that I further expand the YUKATA COWBOY® brand into a new series taking place in multiple countries around the world. This seemed like an extremely ambitious endeavor, but also totally in line with my goal of creating cross-cultural works that bring the world together.

In the meantime, journalist friend Roland Kelts, an expert on the impact of Japanese anime and pop culture on the West (who also interviews me in the YUKATA COWBOY book), encouraged me to develop a series of YUKATA COWBOY episodes set in Tokyo.

With Joel and Roland's advice, as a first step to realizing a new spin-off titled LOST & FOUND COWBOY, I began to work on a series of episodes about Yukata Cowboy's life in Tokyo after he returns from Europe.

## Casting Cross-Culturally

As I dove into pre-production, I happened to meet American actress Kellie Holway at a gathering of English-speaking film professionals in Tokyo, and we sensed we shared a similar comedic sensibility. Kellie watched our original YUKATA COWBOY® series and told me how much she enjoyed it. Later, we also learned that she had seen my earlier feature film CAST ME IF YOU CAN.

Kellie was more than an actress – as a dancer, she had performed at Walt Disney World in Florida and at Tokyo Disneyland. She had performed in the First National Broadway Tour of *42nd Street* and worked as an actress and narrator in New York, Portland, Singapore and Tokyo. Kellie also spoke Japanese and had traveled widely. Her specific talents offered new possibilities for our series – to incorporate dance and learning Japanese into our storyline.

My directorial instinct told me that Kellie would be suited for our series. I thought it might be interesting to cast Kellie against Risa Yamauchi, a skilled, talented and humorous actress I had cast in CAST ME IF YOU CAN. I invited Kellie and Risa to read/rehearse an episode about Yukata Cowboy helping an American visitor in Tokyo and guiding her to an Airbnb, where the host doesn't speak English. Our “rehearsal” turned out to be a huge success – funny and inspiring.

## Gathering Cross-Cultural Crew

Emi Ueyama, a producer I'd known over the years, kindly told me about a funding source in Japan, but I needed a fiscal sponsor. Luckily my former gallery, Art Front Gallery, kicked into action. Art Front Gallery produces large-scale public art projects, commissioned works and prominent international art festivals. I had worked with them as a video artist for years before I became a film director.

With help from Art Front, we were now in a position to produce our pilot for LOST & FOUND COWBOY with a high production value. I contacted some of the former crew from CAST ME IF YOU CAN and also found new bilingual crew members.

Motomu Ishigaki, a talented New York-based bilingual Japanese

Photo: Masaki Itagaki



Cast and crew wrap up the shoot on the Tokyo dance studio set  
© Globetrot Productions 2019

director of photography, came on board and brought over his camera crew and 6K camera equipment from New York. In Motomu's works, we had seen that he shares my sensibilities with a quiet whimsy, an interest in observing the world and an almost child-like gaze.

Takafumi Sakabe, a bilingual assistant director (AD), came on board not only to handle the normal tasks of an AD but also to watch my performance as the lead actor, while I also directed.

For music, in addition to Pascal Plantinga's theme "Niminy Piminy" from YUKATA COWBOY® and MONA LISA COWBOY, we asked the talented Masataka (Taka) Odaka, our bilingual sound designer from MONA LISA COWBOY, to both compose original music and to do music research and licensing.

For the opening animation and credits, Ben Hillman, who created the opening animation and end-roll credits for our YUKATA COWBOY® and MONA LISA COWBOY series, came on board, excited at the idea of combining live dance footage with his animation.

### Pre-Production & Rehearsals

Our stylist Ayako Kuroha prepared the colorful, upbeat costumes for our cast, while our hair and make-up artist Nana Kozakai tested out different Japanese hair-styles for Kellie.

With line-producer Yoichi Sakurai and Motomu, we did extensive location scouting. In Tokyo, there are a number of studios that can be rented for scenes in houses, flats, restaurants, etc. As an experienced location manager, Yoichi Sakurai could also tell us, for example, exactly where we might get a street shot with Tokyo Tower in the background.

For the dance sequences, Kellie, as the choreographer, became the one who would direct me. I have no background or training in dance – I was definitely way out of my comfort zone – but with Kellie's help and guidance I managed and even found the process enjoyable. In the later stage of our rehearsal, Motomu joined us for camera rehearsals to figure out how to film our dance movements and "action" scenes.

An experienced art director, Jun Terao, came on board, and he quickly and beautifully prepared every set. For example, in Japan, you are not allowed to film at a real bus stop, but Jun "magically" created a bus stop along a regular street. In addition to building the sets, during the film shoot the art department was also busy with props and effects. For the kitchen scene where Cindy and Yukata Cowboy fight over cooking, the art department climbed up on chairs and poured dry pasta onto our faces – one of the funniest behind-the-scenes moments.

### Production

We had to film in the middle of the winter, but fortunately we had secured outdoor apparel – the base layer underwear that Mt. Everest climbers use – which helped enormously. Our first day, the wind was so strong that Kellie's hair kept getting blown all around. In the middle of one take, my cowboy hat flew away and I had to go catch it. Later we incorporated that "accident" – having my cowboy hat blow away momentarily in another scene.

Motomu and his camera team from Urban Mouse LLC in New York did an amazing job with their Dana dolly (a small, one-man-operation

rig to move the camera along tracks), a Movi (an ingenious 3-axis gimbal that stabilizes and minimizes camera motion while filming) and a state-of-the-art 6K camera. Even the simplest shots were moving and filmed dynamically. In the dance studios, Motomu often used the mirror wall in innovative ways that surprised and amused us.

For our opening animation, our animator, Ben Hillman, asked us to film sequences of Kellie dancing with a hula-hoop against a white screen in a studio. He then integrated Kellie's dance with an animated Yukata Cowboy figure dancing in an animated world with recognizable international monuments such as the Eiffel Tower.

Andrew Hartsell, a professional photographer, joined us on locations for most of our shooting days and took amazing promotional and behind-the-scenes stills for us.

If we had had more funding and more of the script, we could have kept filming forever.

Photo: Andrew Hartsell



Director of photography Motomu Ishigaki (L) & director Atsushi Ogata discuss shots  
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### Post-Production

After such an exciting shoot, it was sad to part from my cast and crew and be left alone to edit the footage. However, once I downloaded the Red Plug-In to my editing software Final Cut Pro X, I was surprised how easily I could immediately start editing our footage even on my simple Mac Powerbook!

I did all the editing myself. The dance scenes took longer but were

Photo: Andrew Hartsell



Yukata Cowboy & Cindy dance joyously in Tamagawadai Park  
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also fun. Once I completed the picture edit, Taka worked on the music and sound editing and also brought in a live violinist for the final music recording. I proceeded to the color-correction process, in which we adjusted colors, exposures, tones, etc. scene to scene, and sometimes shot to shot, in order to create visual consistencies and transitions, as well as selective emotional tones. We accomplished this through extensive consultation with Motomu, myself and our colorist Miki Inagawa, who was also our colorist for MONA LISA COWBOY as well as my editor on an earlier short film ETERNALLY YOURS.

## Screenings, Awards, Release & Reception

In 2019, we began presenting our trailer and pilot for LOST & FOUND COWBOY at various festivals. We presented our project at the Digital Market (DIMA) at Die Seriale in Giessen, Germany. Then in South Korea we screened our pilot at the Seoul Web Fest, where Kellie Holway was awarded Best Rising Star. We continued to screen in Berlin, Bilbao and Rio de Janeiro. We won Best Pilot at Asia Web Awards in South Korea and Best Editing at Apulia Web Fest in Puglia, Italy. In New Zealand, we were nominated for Best Pilot and Best International Narrative Alumni Award. We've also been selected for web fests in Sicily, Minnesota, Miami, New Jersey, Ozark Mountain (Missouri) and Montreal, as well as the Portland Comedy Film Festival in Oregon.

Our pilot was also screened at the London Short Series Fest where the audience laughed uproariously. As a result of that great reception, we had the pleasure of launching LOST & FOUND COWBOY on the new UK-based streaming service Twisted Mirror TV, specializing in comedy. At the end of July 2020, during the pandemic, we launched our series and began streaming online worldwide except for Asia. In August, I was awarded the Michael Ajakwe Pioneer Award 2020 at the prestigious Marseille Web Fest in France for my "major role in promoting the web series around the world".

Since our launch, we've had feedback from numerous viewers under lockdown in the US, Spain and even India. One viewer says he found our series "so wholesome, which in cynical US is refreshing". Another mentioned that the series made her smile, which she found "very important and valuable in these difficult times". Another viewer said it reminded him of Juzo Itami's *Tampopo*. We also had comments saying that it felt like a "travelogue", showing what it might be like for foreign visitors to come to Japan for the first time. Viewers said they enjoyed how much the style and the production of the new series had expanded over the years and also felt the combination of Cindy and Yukata Cowboy working well. Viewers range in age from their 20s to 70s. It really seems to have had the desired uplifting effect on people who might be internationally minded but unable to travel under lockdown.

## Stand-Up Comedy

Independent film directors have traditionally found breakthrough success through the major international film festival circuits, but this is not so much the case with comedy. Having worked in independent cinema and scripted series, I felt the need to step back and see how to help advance our project further in the field of comedy.

Comedians traditionally have first found success in the stand-up field and have moved on to film or television. Steve Martin was a very successful stand-up comedy performer before having huge success in the film world. Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock and many others have followed similar career paths. More recently, we see the South African comedian Trevor Noah's success in hosting the Daily Show in the United States, commenting on the daily political news with humor.

Parallel to the creation and dissemination of the LOST & FOUND COWBOY series, I also began to expand YUKATA COWBOY® into the field of live stand-up comedy performances in English. Starting from my cross-cultural autobiographical experiences and observations as in the original YUKATA COWBOY® sketch comedy series, I developed more than 11 sets of four minutes each with topics ranging from my tri-national upbringing in London, Tokyo and New York, air travel and binge-watching, being always mistaken for a delivery man, experiences with bicycles and elevators in the Netherlands, working as an actor in Croatia, being chased by security guards as a teenager and adult, misadventures with car alarms in Boston and Los Angeles, and being mistaken for a bellboy in Amsterdam, a gas station attendant in Austria, and an Asian gangster in Maine.

I began performing live stand-ups in Tokyo with the expat community, and also at venues in Boston and LA – as Yukata Cowboy. I wrote, acted and directed my own sets with feedback and guidance from my producer Sian Evans. Compared to the material of many other comedians I watched, I found my Yukata Cowboy material to be lighter, more uplifting and wholesome. In addition to Trevor Noah, I particularly enjoyed watching John Mulaney and also live comedy shows in LA at the Hollywood Improv and the Laugh Factory.

As the pandemic began to spread, I began to incorporate Covid-19 as a topic in my own stand-up routines. Concerned over personal safety, I began to wear gloves and wipe the shared microphone with alcohol tissues, but I turned that also into a comedic performance by saying: "I love you all but I don't want to die yet." But also in Tokyo, the live venues began to close down in March 2020 as the pandemic spread across the world.

## Comedy Production in the Time of Covid

With the spread of Covid-19, live comedy performance venues were closing down and film productions were being cancelled. Emergency lockdown measures were announced around the world. How did I continue with our comedy production? Find out in the second part of this article in the next issue of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*. Stay tuned!

LOST & FOUND COWBOY is streaming outside of Asia at <https://twistedmirror.tv/en/lost-found-cowboy>

For trailer and more info: <https://www.lostandfoundcowboy.com>

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