

# The Generous Range of Variety and Richness in Contemporary Japanese Films

By Shinada Yukichi

IN 2003, a host of events were held around the world to commemorate the centenary of the birth of the film director Ozu Yasujiro, whose popularity and esteemed reputation overseas rival those of Kurosawa Akira. The screening of Ozu works and a symposium hosted by the New York Japan Society were said to be quite a success. In Japan as well, symposiums were held on the subject of Ozu's work, and the 30-some films still extant were shown at screenings and aired on television.

Japanese directors including Kurosawa, Ozu, Mizoguchi Kenji and Naruse Mikio have been critically acclaimed internationally. They have all passed on, but when calling to mind film directors that are professionally active today, one cannot fail to mention Kitano Takeshi.

Kitano directed and starred in *Zatoichi*, a samurai film about a blind warrior, and took the Special Director's Award at La Biennale di Venezia in 2003. Under the stage name, "Beat Takeshi," he is among the celebrity elite in Japan as both a stand-up comedian and TV personality. In 1988, he made his directorial debut with *Sono Otoko Kyobo ni Tsuki* (Violent Cop) and created a stir with his depictions of ruthless violence. Over the past 15 years, he has directed 11 films, including his most recent work *Zatoichi*. He was awarded the Golden Lion at La Biennale de Venezia in 1998 for *HANA-BI*. In 2001, he directed *BROTHER*, a collaborative work by Japanese and British production companies, filmed on location on the West Coast of the United States.

As one can easily guess from his record of commendations, Kitano is a renowned Japanese director in Europe. Whatever the reason, be it the success of *Zatoichi* at Venice or the film's popularity in Japan, an article on Kitano appeared in the Asian edition of *Time* magazine. (A *Time* magazine writer came from Hong Kong to interview me

at length, and I explained the distinguishing characteristics of Kitano's movies.)

The problem for Kitano, who had directed 10 works prior to *Zatoichi*, was that although his movies were critically acclaimed, they were not commercially successful. *Zatoichi*, however, would become Kitano's first box office hit. It is said that investors' confidence in Kitano will rise substantially from now on. Last year, in the Nikkan Sports Movie Award film competition sponsored by the Japanese sports daily, *Nikkan Sports*, Kitano was awarded the grand prize in the director's category. He said at the award ceremony, "Because this movie was a hit, I think it will be easier for me to make movies in the future."

Japanese movies have maintained an upward trend in the past decade. Ten years ago, the number of moviegoers was about 130 million annually, but in 2003, that figure rose to around 160 million.

The largest annual movie theater audience ever recorded in Japan was 1.23

billion in 1958. Following that year, the number of moviegoers began to decline gradually, and in 1993, the figure had dropped to one-tenth of its peak level. The most significant reason for this phenomenon is said to be the diversification of amusement activities. Though movies had once been the public's sole form of leisure, amusement options began to take various shapes as Japan experienced overall economic growth. Leisure revenue, which had been streaming primarily toward movies, began to diverge into a range of areas, and movies no longer held a firm grip.

From the perspective of quality, director Imamura Shohei, a two-time winner of the Palme d'Or at the Festival International Due Film De Cannes for *Narayama Bushiko* (Ballad of Narayama) and *Unagi* (The Eel), had been a prime figure in Japanese film since the death of Kurosawa, the international virtuoso, who reigned supreme in Japan's movie industry. Commercially, the movie industry continued to flag, but the legacy of Japanese movies as a form of cul-

Photo: © KUROSAWA Production Inc.



Kurosawa Akira has been critically acclaimed internationally

Photo: © 2003 BANDAI VISUAL • TOKYO FM • DENTSU • TV ASAHI • SAITO ENTERTAINMENT / OFFICE KITANO



Kitano Takeshi's "Zatoichi" was his first box office hit

ture was passed down from Kurosawa to Imamura, and in turn, from Imamura to Kitano. They defended the traditions of Japan's golden era of movies, born of such masterminds as Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, Ozu and Naruse.

As for the state of the Japanese movie industry, the decrease in movie audiences exhausted the larger film companies. At the beginning of the 1970s, they faced a major predicament with the bankruptcy of the Japanese film giants Daiei Pictures and Nikkatsu Corp. Theaters continued to dwindle from the peak of 4,000 reached in the industry's heyday.

One could say that the theaters finally spotted a glimmer of hope when Japan's first cinema complex was built in Ebina, Kanagawa Prefecture in 1993.

Since then, cinema complexes have been springing up here and there and, as if stirred by them, moviegoers have been flocking to cinemas in increasingly larger numbers. Over 50% of the movies shown in multiplexes are of foreign origin and that ratio is growing. Even so, it is fair to say that, compared to European

countries such as France and Germany, Japanese movies are effectively resisting the market dominance of foreign movies, especially those from America. It is said that in Europe and the United States, American movies have seized over 70% of the market.

Today in Japan, large companies that had annually produced over 50 films are dramatically scaling back their production, while smaller filmmakers are producing a number of movies on modest budgets. Such is the phenomenal change that is taking place in the fundamental structure of movie production.

Large companies once kept their own studios and theaters and maintained exclusive contracts with actors and actresses, and retained technical staff as permanent employees. But with the disappearance of these schemes, studios brought an end to the regular hiring and training of new personnel as skilled professionals. Instead, new movie-creating talent is being cultivated from among the young people working at smaller movie productions and those subcontracted by television programs.

*Tasogare Seibei* (Twilight Samurai), the samurai movie that dominated the 2002 Japanese movie awards, was the work of a veteran director, Yamada Yoji, who had risen through the ranks from assistant director to director at Shochiku, a film company steeped in tradition. However, Yukisada Isao, director of *GO*, which collected the most awards in 2001, was the young talent of a new generation who had no past studio affiliations or studio work experience.

Of course Kitano has never worked as a staff member at any movie studio. He started off gaining experience as a stage entertainer in Asakusa, the amusement

district in downtown Tokyo. He then branched out into *manzai*, a unique form of Japanese stand-up comedy performed by a pair, appearing on TV and becoming a popular figure across the country. Later, his *manzai* partnership was dissolved, and he began making solo appearances on TV programs such as variety shows. He is now one of the busiest sought-after talents in Japan. He had acted in movies in the past (his most famous films include Oshima Nagisa's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*), but he has no movie staff experience. In fact, he is entirely self-taught.

It is a widely known fact in Japanese movie circles that Kurosawa recognized Kitano's aptitude as a director early on. Needless to say, Kitano also held Kurosawa's talent in high regard.

In 2003, veteran director Onchi Hideo, who trained at the Toho movie studio, demonstrated his superior staging skills in *Warabinoko* (To the Bracken Fields), based on the folk story of *Ubasuteyama* (about a poor village in which old people were customarily abandoned in the mountains). Kuroki Kazuo, also a veteran director with a long career, who made the transition from documentary movies to dramas, is credited for his outstanding work, *Utsukushii Natsu Kirishima* (A Beautiful Summer in Kirishima), which depicts life in the Japanese countryside in the waning days of World War II. Both are old hands, well versed in the aesthetic qualities of traditional Japanese movies and are of a generation that is presenting outstanding works to the world. And on the other hand, young up-and-coming directors are producing unique projects in large numbers.

I think it is fair to say that the Japanese movies of our time offer a generous range of variety and richness. **JS**

Shinada Yukichi is a film critic and a professor emeritus of Tama Art University.