

Notebook Interview

勝手にしやがれ #8. Tokyo Filmex: Where Did Japan Go?

An interview with the directors of Tokyo's FilmEx Festival.

Stephen Sarrazin • 08 MAR 2011

勝手にしやがれ : Japanese Film & Media On Its Own Terms



Above: From left to right, Tokyo FilmEx festival directors Kanako Hayashi and Shozo Ichiyama; and Nobuteru Uchida's prize-winning film, *Love Addition*.

Last November, I had a conversation with Tokyo FilmEx Festival directors Shozo Ichiyama and Kanako Hayashi. For more than a decade, this duo has helmed Japan's most serious festival, one dedicated to independent cinema from

Asia. Office Kitano, [Takeshi Kitano](#)'s production company, has remained its key partner over the years, and helped Japan's support of Iranian directors as well as groundbreaking figures from China, most notably [Jia Zhangke](#), a regular at FilmEx from the beginning. The festival also revealed the fragile state of art cinema in and from Japan and how a very small, centralized community that has been determining what fits into this category, and what is not allowed in; a community that's aged while being unable to neither find nor form new heirs. The 2010 edition of Filmex emphasized the crisis in contemporary Japanese art film production; although UniJapan was on hand to provide press screenings of established auteurs, the festival itself struggled to find new Japanese directors to include in its competition section, which, as fate would have it, was won by a young director from Japan, Nobuteru Uchida, who received the prize from Berlinale Forum founder Ulrich Gregor.

SHOZO ICHIYAMA: You've been at every edition of the festival since it started, haven't you.

NOTEBOOK: And before, I remember having coffee with you at Spiral Hall, we were introduced through Office Kitano people, prior to the first edition.

KANAKO HAYASHI: So you know the festival's history very well...

NOTEBOOK: The good years, the wrong turns...I wanted to talk about the one distinctive feature of this last edition, which was the very discrete presence of new Japanese filmmakers. As if the consequences of Japanese cinema being currently in the hands of TV networks, talent agencies and private production committees finally affected the festival's selection. Could you offer your perspective on how this happened, over the course of a decade?

ICHIYAMA: The first change here took place around 2004-2005, when suddenly Japanese films started becoming box office hits, which hadn't happened in a long time. Young people were going back to the cinema to watch Japanese films, while back in the nineties, even with all the strong new directors emerging, we were complaining that this audience wasn't going to see them. The problem, as you mentioned, was that this new crop of films was produced by Japan's main TV networks, like Fuji TV and TBS. Japan still has a lot of talented directors and auteurs, but most of the directors behind those recent hits were coming from television, and their films were in many ways TV movies.

NOTEBOOK: You mean this as a bad thing,

which was also the case in the past, overseas...
while now many TV networks abroad have
opened so many new venues for directors,
writers, television.

ICHIYAMA: Yes it's incredible, but still not the
case here. I can understand why the Japanese
networks are using those TV directors, who are
used to the companies' budgets and respecting
the deadlines, the availability of the young stars
who can move on to all kinds of different
projects. Whereas if they're hire a real filmmaker
then...

HAYASHI: Films can easily go over budget and
schedule. They don't want to change the
scripts...

ICHIYAMA: The TV producers also have to go
looking for financial partners and the last thing
they want is a director who would refuse to
compromise.

NOTEBOOK: Some independent filmmakers
have crossed over however, haven't they?

ICHIYAMA: Yes that's right; one example is
[Akihiko Shiota](#), whose indie film *Canary* we had
shown at a previous edition of FilmEx. He was
hired afterwards by TBS and made *Yomigairi*
which was a big hit and then shot *Dororo*, also
for TBS and that was another smash for him. I

believe he suffered at times making that last film, but in spite of his success was still not in a position to compromise...Actually TBS is the main network producing film directors, they worked with [Takahisa Zeze](#), and Ryuichi Hiroki as well. Actually Hiroki's film, *April Bride*, for a commercial work, was not bad at all; I'm convinced however that it would have been worse if a TV director had shot it. But there's a problem now facing the networks, they're in a bad situation because ratings are dropping, audiences are getting smaller and as a result sponsors are either pulling out or spending much less on advertising time. The only station that isn't suffering right now is NHK.

NOTEBOOK: The flip side of this newfound success is that the majority of these films simply can't be exported; they're not good enough, and the producers aren't especially motivated. To my mind it's not simply a crisis of directors but a crisis of depth, in regards to narratives, screenplays. The overwhelming lack of vision, a social vision, the abandonment of any critical stance...

HAYASHI: There were some rare exceptions, like CineQuanon's producer Lee Chong-jik, who was behind the wonderful *Hula Girls*, about the mining life in Japan. He was among the recent victims; his company went bankrupt.

ICHIYAMA: Actually that was the only real hit they had, although they produced several fine films. There's another crisis we should mention, which is the DVD market. In many production cases half of the money might come from DVD publishers, producers are relying on them. But recently more and more DVD stores are vanishing, both rental and sales.

NOTEBOOK: Do you think audiences are downloading films?

ICHIYAMA: No I don't. The download business is actually quite poor. DVD audiences have disappeared, but I don't know where they went...

HAYASHI: The other issue is that in Japan no one is truly teaching younger generations what to watch, or finding a way to get them interested. And so when they go to rent DVDs, they'll just select those films they've heard of. They wouldn't know what to select amongst that mass of classics, or why they should pick one in the first place. For cinephiles, DVDs and downloads are simply further arenas to invest in, but for beginners, it brings more confusion.

NOTEBOOK: Renewing the audience.

ICHIYAMA/HAYASHI: Exactly. We'd like to avoid words like "education," but at least focus on

ways to introduce film history to a younger generation.

NOTEBOOK: Does this affect your festival? Has the audience increased, decreased over the years?

ICHIYAMA: It gradually increased, and this year it felt younger.

HAYASHI: Twitter actually played a role here.

ICHIYAMA: That's right. I was counting the number of tweets after the first screenings, so if the audience liked the film, then it would be full for the second screening, or evening screenings. They'd comment immediately after the film.

HAYASHI: A lot of university students of course.

ICHIYAMA: And more directors in their forties and fifties are teaching in universities, for example Rikkyo University, which is not specialized in film per se, but that has film courses. [Makoto Shinozaki](#) is teaching there, and encouraging his students to go to FilmEx. And Nobohiro Suwa is actually president of a university now, Tokyo Zokei, and he's also having his students attend the festival.

NOTEBOOK: The Shigehiko Hasumi method...

ICHIYAMA: Right! Of course, he retired several years ago but some of his students are now teaching film. Few cinema chains organize retrospectives however, Toho has morning cycles of classics, at 10am, but students are often in class at that time; those programs are attended by senior citizens...

NOTEBOOK: One big change here in Tokyo that might explain this shrinking audience is that seeing art films used to exist socially, it was something that people did, in the way they went to see dance performances, plays, went to cafes. Interest in art cinema seems to have retreated back into academic spheres and has ceased to exist as something trendy to do for younger generations. Art films are attracting smaller numbers of people than contemporary art exhibitions, another unfortunate issue.

ICHIYAMA: In some ways yes that's true, but movie theaters/distributors like EuroSpace and Image Forum have been able to attract large and stable audiences in the last few years.

NOTEBOOK: Yes, but as we both know, they're just about the only ones left...

HAYASHI: Yes but the audience was made up of young people, those who are sick of TV dramas and predictable content. They are gradually searching for real cinema. The worst time for us

at the festival was two or three years ago, our opening and closing films had not been picked up by any Tokyo distributor...The situation has improved somewhat.

NOTEBOOK: Now what about young Japanese directors? Where are they, how do you find them?

ICHIYAMA: The situation is very tough for them. Like I said, TV networks won't hire them, and producers are not looking for such projects. But there are very talented directors out there, like FilmEx prize winner Nobuteru Uchida who made *Love Addiction*. It's his third feature, but he works on weekdays and makes his films over weekends. We don't give up. The budget on that film was one million yen, or \$12,000...

HAYASHI: He could make excellent films if he was given the proper budget.

NOTEBOOK: Is this where Japanese cinema stands? 1989 to 2004 or so has become a contemporary golden age and the last six years have been...

HAYASHI: Very severe.

NOTEBOOK: Should promising film students be in a festival, do their films stand up against those of directors from other Asian countries who benefit from a more diversified industry? Is

it so severe that you are placed in a situation wherein you must go to these schools to find content?

HAYASHI: Film schools are a serious subject that should be discussed. Talent exists everywhere. We simply see as many films as possible.

ICHIYAMA: Young filmmakers are sending us DVDs directly. We don't compromise, we don't give up. We get films from cities and universities from across Japan. This year was exceptional—the grand prize and audience prize went to Japanese films.

HAYASHI: We've introduced masters classes, in cooperation with the Tokyo Metropolitan City Government, and we have about twenty filmmakers attending, many from South East Asia, but there are five Japanese directors attending as well.

ICHIYAMA: It's a great opportunity for them to meet directors from the Asian film world, masters like [Hou Hsiao-hsien](#) and his producer [Simon Field](#). All the participants, including Japanese, are staying in the same dormitory. It's an opportunity to expand their network for new projects. The festival becomes a place for match making, not just between the director and the audience but also between themselves.

NOTEBOOK: What about another aspect of that support structure, the writers, the critics—are you seeing a new generation emerge?

HAYASHI: That's another serious matter...

ICHIYAMA: The problem is that Japan doesn't have many serious film publications. The new writers are active on their blogs, they can't make a living from writing.

HAYASHI: Kinema Junpo is still the leading magazine but I'm not sure how many young readers are looking at it. A lot of money is spent for promoting the films, before the film comes out, but very little after it's released, which is when we should be talking about the film, after we've all seen it.

ICHIYAMA: And a magazine like Nobody is also having a difficult time maintaining its level of quality. Most people don't know it. Many films at FilmEx don't find distributors right away so if young writers contact major magazines and newspapers the reaction generally is "well we don't know if this film will come out, so we can't talk about it"...The situation is even worse in other Japanese cities, as you can imagine. The one bright spot of each edition of our festival is our historical program, retrospectives introducing unknown masters of Japanese cinema, and several of these have traveled in

Japan and around the world. The [Shimizu](#) program we did is still circulating.

NOTEBOOK: Absolutely, and given the current crisis in contemporary Japanese cinema this is a trend which will expand internationally I'm sure, looking back at Japan's classic and modern eras.

ICHIYAMA/HAYASHI: But every year we must find sponsors to make new prints. It's an expensive process. The present is a difficult place to be but we're already working on the next edition.

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