

# Dutch make own Japanese cinema event

By Aaron Gerow

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The current flood of movie DVDs can give you the false impression that you can watch anything you want whenever you want. You probably can, provided it is a Hollywood film, and one made in the last decade or so. Otherwise, there are vast spans of film history and huge tracts of world cinema that have barely been touched by the DVD revolution. Want to watch with English subtitles some of the classic movies of Africa or Latin America, two of the world's seven continents? Tough luck. There's barely anything out there, and given the economics of the market, there probably never will be.

So what do you do if you are dying to see some movies that have just not come to your country?

How about starting your own film festival? That is what some Dutch fans of Japanese cinema decided to do over some drinks in 2004. They banded together and held the first Dejima Japanese Film Festival in May 2005—named after the Dutch trading post in Nagasaki during the Edo period (1603-1968). There were only eight films, each shown just once, but it was a resounding success and prompted an even bigger edition for 2006. Twenty-two recent Japanese movies were shown multiple times in three Dutch cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht) from Nov. 3 to 12. The festival now had some money to invite guests from Japan, and I was one of the lucky invitees.

The festival director, Luc Lafleur (only 28 years old and a film studies student), told me about the frustrations that led them to act.

"No Japanese film has opened in regular Dutch theaters in the last 18 months. Older festivals may show a couple of Japanese movies, but the selection is based on the whims of the programmers and they tend to avoid films other big festivals have shown."

Lafleur and his friends originally just thought of showing films on DVD, but the lack of titles and the advice of the owner of Bioscoop Het Ketelhuis, a unique three-screen cinema built inside the former boiler-house of a gas works, prompted them to go for film. The success of another homegrown Japanese film festival in Europe, Frankfurt's Nippon Connection, also provided encouragement.

Luckily, European institutions have money to help adventuresome projects like this. Support from banks and the Prince Bernhard Cultural Fund helped them get started. The Dutch Film Fund would fund the 2006 edition if it showed in at least three Dutch cities, and other aid was forthcoming from institutions like the Japan Foundation and the International Institute for Asian Studies and corporations like Japan Airlines and FedEx.

The 2006 Dejima Film Festival was thus able to show a wide variety of works, ranging from the powerfully controversial *Gerumaniumu no Yoru* (The Whispering of the Gods, directed by Tatsushi Omori) to the fluffy *Warau Mikaeru* (Arch Angels, directed by Issei Oda, which was appropriately filmed at Dutch theme park Huis ten Bosch in Nagasaki Prefecture). It also offered a five-film retrospective of Ryuichi Hiroki's work, including *Yawarakai Seikatsu* (It's Only Talk), one of this year's best films. Omori and Hiroki were flown in to discuss their films and participate in a panel discussion.

Also publishing a festival catalog with critical essays on current Japanese cinema, Lafleur stressed the importance of bringing together audiences, directors, critics and academics.

"One of our goals is not just to show films, but to reflect on and discuss them. If we don't do that, I don't think there's any point in doing this."

This is one factor that distinguishes Dejima from such largely commercial enterprises as the Tokyo International Film Festival, but Lafleur still has economic benefits in mind.

"By showing these films, we hope to create an audience for Japanese cinema and provide incentives for film distributors. Hopefully this can generate a more regular flow of Japanese movies in regular theaters."

It all comes down to trying to see the movies you want to see. Starting a film festival may not be the easiest way to do that, especially for a volunteer organization. Lafleur and colleagues Geert van Bremen and Berend Jan Bockting had their hands full during the festival, but Lafleur is determined to hold a third edition of the Dejima Japanese Film Festival.

If the DVD companies can't give you what you want, you have to do it yourself.