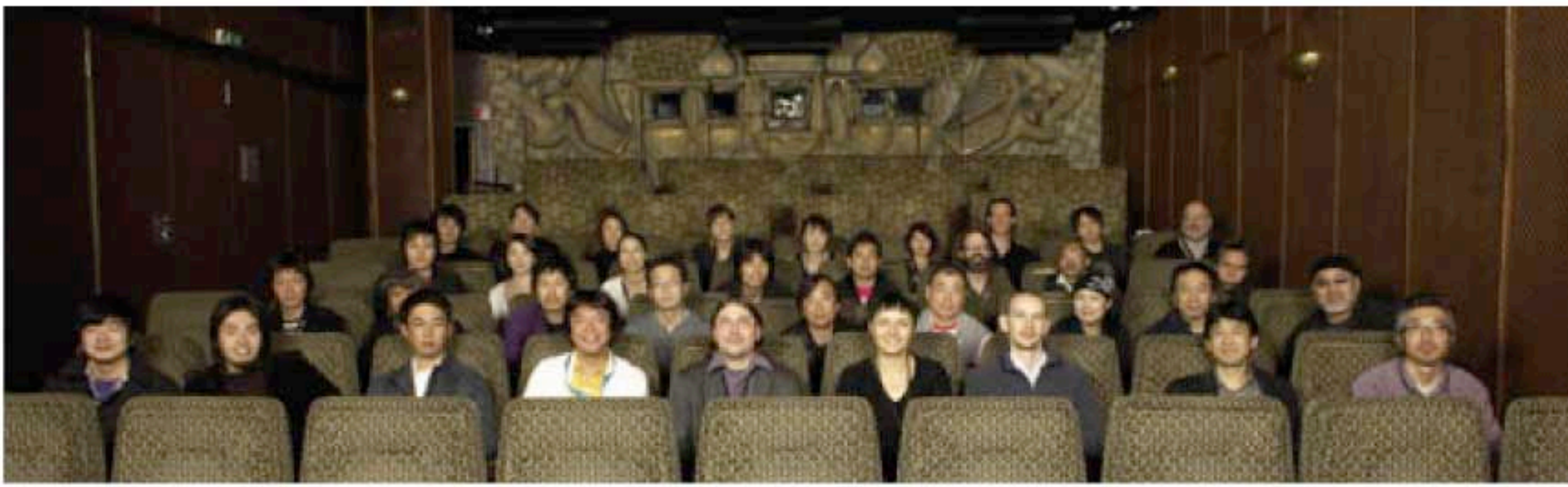
Special guests, including actress Kaori Momoi and director/critic Makoto Shinokazi, are joined by the festival directors at 2007's Nippon Connection

Film festivals: How Japan is viewed from afar

By **ALEXANDER JACOBY**
Special to The Japan Times

Ask most Westerners today what images are brought to mind by the words "Japanese film," and the answers may include a ghost crawling out of a television screen, a woman sticking needles into the face of a paralyzed man, gangsters pumping each other full of lead in the streets of an urban jungle, or teenage schoolchildren battling to the death on a remote island. For others, perhaps mainly of an older generation, Japanese cinema means the dramatization of epic battles between samurai in the remote past, or serene, contemplative stories about the daily lives of Tokyo families.

The first set of images, from films by directors including Hideo Nakata, Takashi Miike and the late Kinji Fukasaku, typify the kind of cinema exported from Japan in recent years, favored with commercial releases abroad and widely available in the West on DVD. The second group of films, by revered names such as Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu, represent the Japanese film classics sent to the West in the 1950s and now screened at art-house cinemas and in traveling retrospectives.

These two categories, however, do not represent the length and breadth of Japanese cinema. Between the popular genres of J-horror, *yakuza* flick and animation on the one hand, and the art-house classics on the other, lies a whole undiscovered country. Gentle, witty, sharply observed nongenre films by artists such as Tomoyuki Furumaya ("Mabudachi [Bad Company]," 2001), Nobuhiro Yamashita ("Riarizumu no Yado [Ramblers]," 2003) and Ryuichi Hiroki ("Yawarakai Seikatsu [It's Only Talk]," 2006) don't fit into the obvious categories. Being hard to pigeonhole, they are tough to market abroad on a commercial scale.

But film festivals — some with an international program, such as Raindance held each fall in London, and some devoted specifically to Japanese cinema, like Holland's irregularly staged Dejima Japanese Film Festival, and Nippon Connection, which runs until April 6 in Frankfurt — are finding a dedicated audience in the West. In the process, they are throwing the spotlight onto other perhaps more realistic depictions of Japan rarely seen by nonresident foreigners.

"Hanai Sachiko no Kareia Shogai (The Glamorous Life of Sachiko Hanai)"

In doing so, such screenings challenge one-sided perceptions of Japan that remain widespread in the West. Alex Zahlten, program director of Nippon Connection, comments that the old stereotypes are still very much alive. "We notice the problem in the advertising for the festival, where it is obvious that people respond strongest to well-established images, and it is very difficult to go against the grain," he remarks. "We take refuge in the thought that as long as we can trick them into the films, they will emerge with some much-needed confusion regarding their preconceptions."

Similarly, Luc Lafleur, director of the Dejima Japanese Film Festival, aims deliberately to broaden audience perceptions both of Japanese cinema and of Japan itself. "People in Europe tend to have a very restricted image of Japan, which is mainly constituted by the images they see, for instance horror films or erotic manga," he says. "Early on in the project, we made it clear that we were aiming to change this image. We try to program films not because they show how different and exotic Japanese culture is, but because they show how people respond to universal issues such as love, death, loneliness or religion."

Broadening horizons

In challenging that image, festivals such as Nippon Connection and Dejima have two paths open to them. The first is to choose films with a topical appeal to foreigners; the second is to select those that reveal aspects of Japan that more commercial releases leave unexplored.

Lafleur comments that he has deliberately programmed films with subject matter of relevance to European audiences. Thus, "Gerumaniumu no Yoru (The Whispering of the Gods)" (2005) dealt with abuse in a Catholic community at a time when similar scandals within the Catholic Church were being debated in Western media, while films about homosexual love such as "46-Okunen no Koi (Big Bang Love: Juvenile A)" (2006) and "Mezon do Himiko (La Maison de Himiko)" (2005) were shown in the context of legislation that had made the Netherlands the first country in the world to permit same-sex marriage.

Jasper Sharp, who programs the Japanese strand at London's Raindance festival, chose in 2006 to screen "Dear Pyongyang" (2005), a documentary about the relationship between a resident Korean who has largely assimilated into Japanese society and her elderly father who remains loyal to the North Korean state.

"Most Westerners would assume that Japan is a fairly homogenous society," says Sharp. "The issue of national identity among Korean Japanese is not something that most Westerners know about, although it's a very hot topic in Japanese film at the moment."

Showing such films in the West is not only a way of challenging prevailing perceptions. In presenting an image of Japan that breaks with traditional assumptions, these screenings also draw attention to directors whose work remains otherwise almost unexposed in the West.

Yamashita is one example. A graduate of the film program at the Osaka University of Arts (Osaka Geidai), he made his first feature, "Donten Seikatsu (Hazy Life)" in 1999, aged 23. It screened successfully at that year's Vancouver Film Festival, where it was awarded a special citation from the panel, and his subsequent films played at festivals including Toronto, Thessaloniki and Rotterdam, earning Yamashita an international profile when he was still a marginal figure in his own country. In the process, Western audiences were exposed to his uniquely eccentric comedies about slackers and no-hopers struggling to make something of themselves in the uncongenial milieu of postbubble Japan.

The bland provincial settings of "Donten Seikatsu," "Riarizumu no Yado" and "Baka no Hakobune (No One's Ark)" (2002), with their small stores and their mixture of crumbling wooden houses and newly prefabricated homes, will be familiar to anyone who has traveled reasonably widely in Japan, but they must have transformed the perceptions of viewers whose image of the country was confined to the sprawling cityscapes and hectic activity of Tokyo.

A body count of one

Some directors who have achieved success on the festival circuit define themselves deliberately in contrast to the more commercially viable genre pictures that can easily win cinema or DVD releases outside Japan. Furumaya won the International Federation of Film Critics prize at Rotterdam in 2001 for "Mabudachi," his second feature, which was a semiautobiographical film about rebellious schoolboys. This was the year that "Battle Royale," Fukasaku's notoriously violent action film about schoolchildren forced to fight to the death, became an international hit, and Furumaya was asked if his film about youthful disaffection expressed a similar view of society.

He replied, "I haven't seen 'Battle Royale.' There's only one death in 'Bad Company.' If it's true that 50 people die in 'Battle Royale,' and I managed to say the same things with only one character dying, then I think I did pretty well."

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