

# Times Capsule

Vol. 4: Film

## Reflecting the golden age of the silver screen

The Japan Times has long celebrated the pleasures of sitting in a dark theater and marveling at the actors on the silver screen.

Japan was an early adopter of cinema, which partially explains its precocious golden age of cinema, which produced the likes of Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu, directors who would inspire a wide range of filmmakers.

Much of the overseas appreciation of Japanese cinema was nurtured by longtime JT contributor Donald Richie and continues to be fostered by foreign film writers such as Mark Schilling.

Over the decades, The Japan Times has reviewed hundreds of domestic and overseas films and spoken with dozens of film artists. The list includes Takashi Miike, Hirokazu Koreeda, Akira Kurosawa and many more.



The Times Capsule series will post topics related to sustainability that we have covered during the 125 years of The Japan Times.

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# KUROSAWA

A lifetime pursuit of cinematic per...

By MARK SCHILLING

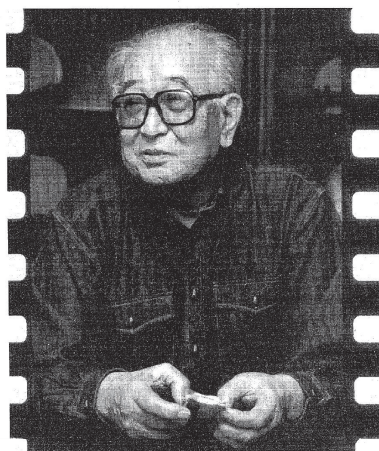
"Why did you come to Japan?" Hearing that question now, I try to be cute, saying, "This was the first stop on my world tour and I'm still waiting to make my second."

Many years ago, I would try to be honest. I told people that I wanted to see the land of Kurosawa.

My experience was utterly typical among boomer film freaks: I saw "Shichinin no Samurai" (The Seven Samurai) at a student film society screening and was electrified. By that time, a decade and a half after its release in 1954, it was considered a classic of world cinema, analyzed by film scholars frame by frame. I only knew that I was seeing a terrific entertainment that made medieval samurai warriors as comprehensible to this Midwestern kid as the cowboys of John Ford. I also realized I was experiencing visual art as profound as anything ever created for the screen.

The parallels with Ford's 1939 "Stagecoach," another film society perennial, were obvious: In both a group of strangers found themselves in a desperate situation in an unfriendly land. Each member of the group may have been a type — Takachi Shimura's wise fatherly samurai leader, Claire Trevor's whore with the heart of gold — but each also had an integrity that had nothing to do with formula or convention, everything to do with their essential humanity. No poses, no neuroses — what you saw was what you got.

Both films had an epic sweep and scale born of an outside-talent and ambition, leavened with a rough masculine humor and a humbling sense of tragedy. Both tapped into a national mythos: The cowboy as the lone hero who upholds justice while disdainful of the letters of civilization; the samurai as the lone hero who



FILMMAKER AKIRA KUROSAWA (1910-1998)

SHIRAZI MURRAY PHOTO

was in his director's eye. Age. Born in seven cities, wanting to be a type who compulsively no interest in the execution of his fall. teacher used his shu shu school. graduati equivalent 1927. Another brother, (a narra bohemian consider 19th-cent story. Do used the films.

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## Juzo Itami dissects society

By KAZUKO FUJIMOTO

STAFF WRITER

In each of his three successive movies, the film director has shown a clear dislike of Japanese society in a most unusual setting — a funeral, a "ramen (Chinese noodle) shop and, more recently, tax evasion.

"My consistent theme, so to speak, has been 'Japanese' — a most curious subtitle," said Juzo Itami, 53, essayist, actor and director of the hit movie "Marusa no Onna (A Woman of Marusa)" at a recent held press conference in Tokyo.

"Marusa" is the jargon for the National Tax Agency's Central Investigation Bureau.

According to Toho Co. Ltd., the distributor of the film, "Marusa" has so far grossed about ¥2.5 billion at the box office and attracted 2 million people — to the cinema since it mostly adults — in early February, opened nationwide in early February.

Itami debuted as a film director with "Gozu" (1984) which depicted the confusion of a modern-day family who has to hold a funeral service for a deceased family member.

"Though the concept of 'community' is now reduced to a shell in our society, it makes a sudden comeback when, for example, a funeral is called for. I tried to depict, with humor, the Eastern family members' attempt to establish the service according to the rules that are no longer rooted inside," said Itami, son of a well-known actor who created a string of unique period adventure films in the pre-war days.

The film, despite its theme, drew much laughter from the audience and won about 30 awards including the year's Golden London Film Festival and the Golden Award at Italy's Venezia Film Festival.

In his second film "Tampopo" (1985), Itami focused on people's bare desire for food and sex — in this society, and for the latest movie, his theme was "okane (money)."

"I had been nursing this idea. When I heard about the tax investigators, I thought, 'That's it.' I thought, by focusing on the people who were hunted down by the tax investigators, I could show an oblique section of our society — this time the

cutting edge would be money," explained the director.

A pachinko parlor proprietor who was tracked down by the Marusa investigate

Thus, the completed story, "a hard-boiled fiction based on mosaic of factual details," presents an all-out conflict between tax evaders and Marusa. The film is filled with details of tax evasion techniques — money and documents buried under the porch, seals hidden beneath the kimono of a Japanese doll or stuffed into a bra strap — as well as techniques employed by the Marusa — cases of tip-dence, and finally, endured warrented investigation involving more than 100 Marusa staff members.

"Marusa" centers around an unwholesome female tax investigator Ryoko Itabara — short and freckled with hunched hair — portrayed by Itami's wife Nobuko who pursues a millionaire tax evader and who has countless hidden bank accounts and a home safe full of gold bullion, and jewelry, bank notes and "hanko (seal)." The all-star film is not a "good guy versus bad guy" movie, cataloging both sides — pursuer and the pursued, quite humanly. In selecting the cast, Itami avoided show people and chose actors and actresses who had "faces with substance."

"I have one day to make a film on 'kasha (corporation) of Japan. But it is so difficult to portray the systems of bookkeeping etc. — on the one hand, I'm planning to

short Itami ab hearing his story, the Marusa a mpreover, persona edly touched the ted him to give in six months of amased. These it alik strength an people — some lone — of this se come up with at Itami, who is upon the succor said to be pr Marusa.

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us mock ferocity — make it tempt to compare him to Chaplin and Keat though comically scruffy and he was also a heroic figure who's own life to revenge the death of chi's samurai. His end is, in tity, just as heartbreakin. prious Hollywood parallel, given ra's Ford connection, was John out in the role of Kikuchiyo and ich as the bandit Tajomaru in "on" and the hired sword San- Vojimbo," Miifune also became type for a long line of dirty Hol- traces, beginning with Clint in the "Vojimbo" remake "A In More" (1984), and contin-

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