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Yamada Yoji Harks Back to Japanese Cinema's Golden Age

Mark Schilling

How many directors make great movies after turning 70? John Huston did it with "The Dead," likewise Kurosawa Akira with "Ran" and Clint Eastwood with "Letters from Iwo Jima," but the numbers are few.

Yamada Yoji. Photo Miura Yoshiaki

To that short list now add Yamada Yoji. The filmmaker is best known for directing all 48 installments of "Otoko wa Tsurai Yo" (aka "Tora-san"), his film series about a lovelorn peddler. 'Tora-san" put Yamada in the Guinness Book of Records for the longest-running movie series in the world, but not on many foreign critics' best-director lists. Instead, he was denounced by many critics (though not this one) as a studio hack, grinding out easily digestible product for the masses.

Even Yamada, when I first met him in 1991 at the height of his "Tora-san" fame, compared himself to a soba-noodle chef, tossing out bowl after bowl of what he hoped was tasty soup.

Tora-san

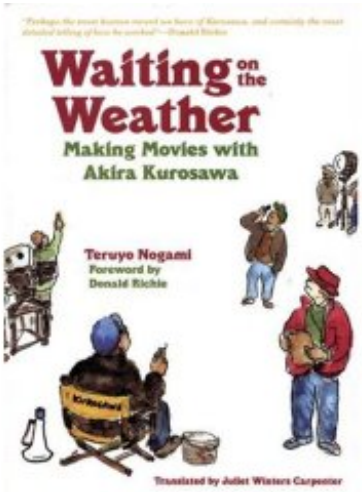
But Yamada also had higher ambitions. "Shiawase no Kiiroi Hankachi (The Yellow Handkerchief of Happiness)" from 1977 and 1991's "Musuko (My Sons)" were serious dramatic films that won many domestic awards, but were little seen abroad.

His true flowering, however, has come this decade, after the "Tora-san" series. In 2002 he released his first period drama, "Tasogare Seibei (The Twilight Samurai)," which scooped an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. He followed up with two more entries in what came to be his "samurai trilogy": 2004's "Kakushi ken oni no Tsume (The Hidden Blade)" and, two years later, "Bushi no Ichibun (Love and Honor)," which were also showered with accolades.

In these films, Yamada largely excised the folksy comedy and sentimentality that had been his "Tora-san" trademarks, instead telling stories of romantic love, family ties and life-or-death battles with a fresh narrative efficiency, visual richness and emotional impact.

In his latest film "Kaabee (Kabei: Our Mother)," Yamada returns to a favorite theme — the family — and the more recent time of 1940-41, just before Japan plunged over the abyss and into World War II.

His script is based on a memoir by Nogami Teruyo about her turbulent life as a girl growing up in Tokyo. Nogami would go on to become Akira Kurosawa's script supervisor for more than four decades. (Disclosure: I have known Nogami for years and interviewed her for her memoir "Waiting on the Weather.")



Waiting on the Weather

Yamada's luminous style and humanistic concerns hark back to Japanese cinema's golden age of Kurosawa, Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi and Mikio Naruse. That is not to say that "Kaabee" is in any way an homage, only that Yamada is the closest in spirit — and talent — to those giants among Japanese directors.

He still knows how to move the big audience to laughter and tears, though. "Kaabee" has all the making of a box-office smash, minus the broad, obvious strokes of the typical commercial director, trained to grab the attention of eyeballs in television land.

Kaabee

Yamada films even the big dramatic moments — such as the shock of a home being stormed by tatami-tromping police and the pathos of a young girl's love for her arrested father — with a distance and detachment, while inviting the audience to draw on its own experience and imagination to complete the picture. It's somewhat the way Rembrandt painted: The themes and subjects are accessible at first glance, but the shadows and subtleties invite further reflection, and say even more.

That particular Old Master comparison also applies to the film's color composition, with its rich, dark browns, and its images that, in their spiritual power and quiet beauty, illuminate the depths of the human heart.

The story begins in February 1940, when Teruyo (Sato Miku), her older sister, Hatsuko (Shida Mirai), her mother, Kayo (Yoshinaga Sayuri) and father, Shigeru (Bando Mitsugoro), are enjoying what will be their last meal together. That night the police arrive to arrest Shigeru, a professor and authority on German literature, particularly of the political kind that calls for peace and is critical of the government.

Kayo tells her daughters that their father will soon return — but he doesn't. Yamazaki (Asano Tadanobu), a geeky but good-hearted former student of Shigeru's, rallies to her side and helps her wangle a visit with Shigeru in jail. She takes Teruyo with her and the girl is horrified by the change that has come over her father, now filthy, emaciated and covered with sores.

Yamazaki becomes a constant, welcome presence in their lives, as does Kayo's younger sister, Hisako (Dan Rei), who comes from Hiroshima to help Kayo with the cooking and child care while attending art school. Meanwhile, Kayo begins teaching at a local elementary school to earn much-needed money.

In short, life resumes a semblance of normality, with interludes of laughter and joy, though Shigeru's absence is keenly felt. As the political climate darkens, the likelihood of his release becomes ever fainter. Also, Kayo's police-chief father (Nakamura Umenosuke), who strongly opposed her marriage, is forced to resign from his post because of his disgraceful son-in-law — and becomes estranged from Kayo as a result.

Relief arrives in the form of ever-smiling Uncle Senkichi (Tsurube Shofukutei), who comes to visit one summer from Nara. The sexually budding Hatsuko hates his suggestive teasing, but Kayo likes his honesty and tolerance — talking to him, she can finally discard her various masks.

Then Japan launches its attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and, with the war in full fury, the Nogami family's small, fragile island of peace begins to fall apart and dissolve.

Of the dozens of Japanese films set in wartime, "Kaabee" is the most heart-breaking, starting from the first scene.

Instead of the usual valiant-but- conflicted warriors, the film centers on one close, but vulnerable, family — particularly the youngest, Teruyo. Playing her, the fresh-faced Miku Sato radiates a natural, childlike wonder and horror far more affecting than the usual movie-kid mugging and posturing. She lifts the film out of the period-drama past and into the living present.

As does Yoshinaga, who powerfully conveys Kayo's fear, exhaustion and bedrock strength. Yes, this screen icon, with more than 100 films and half a century in the business behind her, is too old for the role, but after five minutes I accepted Yamada's explanation for casting her — that people aged more quickly then, and with good reason.

"Kaabee" may sound like high art of the solemn sort, but Yamada injects trademark bits of rough humor, such as Yamazaki's embarrassing roll on the tatami after sitting too long in seiza (an upright formal posture in which the calves are tucked under the thighs), ending with the girls getting a good look at the holes in his socks. Yamada's populist "Tora-san" side is still alive and well, in other words.

"Kaabee" is a masterpiece by any measure. At 76, Yamada is enjoying his own Golden Age — and the best may still be ahead.

Mark Schilling Interviews Yamada Yoji: Voice of Dissent Revives Forgotten War Memories

Yamada Yoji had just finished greeting the audience at the premiere of "Kaabee (Kabei: Our Mother)" at Tokyo's Marunouchi Piccadilly Theater when he sat down with The Japan Times.

At 77, he was slower of step and whiter of hair than when this interviewer first met him on the set of a "Tora-san" movie in 1991, but one thing had not changed: his distinctive, pleasantly nasal voice, obscured only slightly by a cold.

Yamada was in a mood to celebrate: "Kaabee," his 80th film as a director (his first was released in 1961), had been selected for the Competition section of the 58th Berlin International Film Festival (Feb. 7-17).

This is not Yamada's first such honor — three of his previous films have screened in the Berlin Competition. Also, his 2002 period drama "Tasogare Seibei (The Twilight Samurai)" was nominated for an Academy Award in the Best Foreign Language Film category.

Nonetheless, Yamada is still best known in Japan for his 1969-96 film series "Otoko wa Tsurai Yo" (better known as "Tora-san") about a wandering peddler played by Atsumi Kiyoshi, who is forever falling in love but never gets the girl.

Based on a memoir by Nogami Teruyo, a script supervisor for Akira Kurosawa for more than four decades, "Kaabee" is a family drama set in Tokyo in 1940-41, when war clouds were darkening and freedom of expression was vanishing.

In the opening scene the father, a scholar of German literature, is arrested on the charge of shisohan (a "thought" crime).

The mother, played by Yoshinaga Sayuri, then has to raise her two young daughters, Teruyo and Hatsuko, on her own, though her art-student sister (Dan Reiko) and her husband's bumbling-but-dedicated former student (Asano Tadanobu) rally to her side.

MS: *"Kaabee" is set in the early 1940s, but its themes, including the suppression of dissent, still have relevance today. Was that your main reason for wanting to make this film?*

What attracted me first was the childhood memoir by Nogami Teruyo. Her father was actually arrested under the Peace Preservation Law (which had the goal of clamping down on communists, labor activists and opponents of Japan's militarism) and spent time in jail. That's what Japan was like in 1940 and 1941, but Japanese today don't know this. I wanted to rekindle their memories. Those were frightening times, when Japan started the Pacific War with an unstoppable wave.

Kayo, played by Sayuri Yoshinaga, with family in "Kaabee"

Can we say the same frightening, out-of-control forces that started that war are absent from Japan today? In 1945 we made what was supposed to be a strong commitment to peace. But now (certain forces) are trying to change the "peace Constitution."

Japan should have remained the one country in the world with no military and a prohibition against war (in the Constitution). Now Japan is going along with America and the Bush administration. I have doubts about whether that's right.

I imagine that the audience in Berlin will understand this theme.

Yes, in the 1930s and 1940s Germany went through similar experiences. We were both fascist countries. It must have been scary to oppose Hitler at that time, so I think the German audience will understand that aspect.

I've seen a lot of Japanese movies about the war, but yours is something different — you focus on one family instead of combatants.

There aren't many films about that specific time. The movies made in the 1940s had to pass military censors, so they don't express any reality. The movies made after 1945 are also lacking in that they don't portray the lives of ordinary people during wartime.

I heard comments that Yoshinaga Sayuri, at 62, was too old to play the mother, but she brings a sense of realism to the role. She makes you believe that she really could have been that sort of mother in that period.

I think that's because Sayuri-san is always youthful.

She is especially good with the children — there seems to be a real bond.

Yes, her character really is a very kind person. Also, she herself is a woman that Japanese people look up to. She has a special place in the hearts of the Japanese. If you ask who could take Yoshinaga's place in that respect, you'd be stuck for an answer — she's that kind of figure.

The children also look and act true to the period — they look innocent and seem naive compared to today's children. Was that in your mind when you were casting?

No, but the crew and actors made a natural transition to that time period. It's not like you can explain to children and they'll understand. I think it was a natural process.

It's the same with period drama. I worked with the actors and crew to imagine what the period was like. The actual information to hand might be slim — what they ate, what they wore, the words they used and so on, so we imagined together. Or we would look at photographs and such. That sort of effort naturally created an image of 1940s Japan that everybody could share — that kind of thing is really crucial. I did something similar in making "Tasogare Seibei."

Did you have to give a lot acting directions to the children?

It's hard to direct children, to extract what's good from a child's character. When I read Nogami's "Kaabee," a movie popped into my head — George Stevens' "I Remember Mama" (1948). I really liked that movie and thought I'd like to make something like that, where a little girl narrates her memories of her mother.

Did you talk with Nogami about her own memories of the period?

Yes, we had a lot of discussions. I had a lot to ask her especially about the period (of the film). There were a lot of things only Nogami would have known, such as how her father was arrested. Of course, she wrote about it, but I needed more detail. I wanted to know how she took a boxed lunch to her father in prison.

I asked for descriptions of other things too, such as her memories of family life, what kind of clothes she wore, whether she wore traditional geta (wooden sandals) or shoes, what she did with her friends. The staff involved with the visuals also asked her a lot of questions.

Your casting of Asano Tadanobu was against type. He usually plays violent or troubled characters, such as his role in the Academy Award nominated "Mongol," but in your film, he's the nerdy comic relief.

That was quite an adventure, quite a challenge for me, because he had never played a role like that before. He had always had the beard and long hair, so I asked him if he would shave his beard and cut his hair. He'd had that look for a long time, but he said, "I'll do it, I'll cut my hair" (laughs). He plays a very serious but clumsy character, good-hearted but not very smart.

The look of "Kaabee" is also different from the usual film set in that period. Certain scenes reminded me of the Dutch master painter Rembrandt.

That was in the back of my mind — the subdued colors and lighting. I focused on that.

What message would you like people to take away from the film?

When the war ended in 1945, Japan was the loser and there was an international trial. Then Tojo Hideki and other Class-A war criminals were hanged. But in Japan the police had been rounding up people who were opposed to the war and killing them without trial. About 60,000 people were arrested.

In Germany, those who cooperated with the Nazis were tried in German courts, separately from the Nuremberg War Crime Trials. In Japan we didn't have that. The husband in "Kaabee" is basically killed by the police, but the killers weren't put on trial. They brazenly returned to the police force.

Japan made a wonderful postwar Constitution, but no amends have been made for past wrongs. In Germany, the Nazi collaborators were made to pay for what they did; in Japan, a war criminal could became prime minister, such as Kishi Nobusuke, the grandfather of our recent prime minister, Abe Shinzo. There's something strange about that.

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