

A Conversation with Nakadai Tatsuya

仲代達矢様との話

Tokyo, December 8, 2009

Nakadai Tatsuya is, at the age of nearly 77, Japan's best-known and most accomplished living actor. He is a veteran of more than 150 films and close to 100 stage plays during his career. And he's still going strong. His filmography includes many by some of Japan's most acclaimed directors like Kurosawa Akira, Kobayashi Masaki, and Naruse Mikio. He is, as we would say, a screen legend, like John Wayne or Kathryn Hepburn. He was arguably the Leonardo di Caprio of his time; or, put another way, the Harrison Ford of ours.

"Ashiba-san wa?" Where's Mr. Ashiba?

I was standing alone in the *genkan* to Nakadai's well-known and long-established acting studio called *Mumeijuku*, located in the upscale Setagaya-ku neighborhood of suburban Tokyo. *Mumeijuku* literally means "the school with no name," so one might reasonably call it Actors Anonymous in English. I was speaking with Nakadai's executive assistant Shimada Reiko, prior to our appointed meeting, which she had confirmed. Ashiba Munechiku, the general manager of I-House, is an old friend of 35 years who was my Tokyo intermediary with Nakadai's office. Ms. Shimada had simply assumed that Ashiba-san would tag along as interpreter, despite a pair of letters from me – in Japanese – that set up the meeting. The International House of Japan, known more familiarly as the *Kokusai Bunka Kaikan*, is a landmark members-only not-for-profit residence and conference center in Roppongi, in central Tokyo, having years ago been designated an Important Cultural Property by the Japanese government. It is an island of peace and tranquility – with its own award-winning traditional *sekitei*, a beautiful landscape garden – right in the middle of the world's 2nd-largest city. It has always been my home away from home whenever I'm in Japan.

I explained to Shimada-san in my most honorific Japanese that Mr. Ashiba wouldn't be coming today because I had expected to conduct the interview alone. We bantered for a few minutes and I watched her face visibly relax as she gradually realized that this was not going to be the usual meeting with yet another clueless *gaijin* (foreigner). But I hadn't been entirely convinced that we would actually meet until I got there. The meeting was initially scheduled for Wednesday, December 9th, then moved to Tuesday the 8th, then back to Wednesday and finally back to Tuesday at mid-day. Ironically, it was Pearl Harbor Day in Japan (the 7th in the US), no longer news in either country. Though still in the city of Tokyo, *Mumeijuku* is located about an hour and a half southwest of Roppongi by a combination of three trains (two transfers, fortunately on parallel lines) and a bus. You can get there by taxi, too, of course, but it would deplete your 401(k). Flag-fall on Japanese cabs now is ¥710.- or about \$8.- at current exchange rates. Compare that with \$2.50 in New York City. I hit the rails.

I slipped out of my shoes and padded behind Shimada-san to the studio's small conference room, wearing the sort of soft felt slippers that are *de rigueur* in traditional Japanese interiors. Ms. Shimada excused herself to fetch The Boss. The walls of the room were bare except for a large original watercolor by Kurosawa Akira depicting Nakadai as King Lear from his award-winning movie *Ran*. It was hanging behind the head of the rectangular table, signed inversely ("A.K.") by the famed director. Kurosawa was well known for his painting

technique (he had been a visual artist long before he became a film director) and created the storyboards for most of his own films.

I unpacked my notebook, a stack of name cards (you never know how many you may need), and an *o-miyage* I had wrapped and brought along as a gift for the famous actor, in honor of another age-old Japanese custom. Gift-giving, for any and all occasions, is a Big Deal in Japan, and a gift is considered obligatory any time someone does you a favor.

Nakadai, known popularly as Naka-san, burst into the room, a big smile etched across his weathered face. He greeted me cheerfully, like a prodigal brother, having likely been told by Shimada-san that he could relax because we'd be nattering in Japanese. I was a bit taken aback at first because he was now so much shorter than he was half a century ago on screen. As a young actor, he was quite tall – over six feet – much taller than his fellow actors. His debut role for Kurosawa was a non-speaking part in *Yojimbo* in 1961. When he strolled onto the main street of that dusty village as a tall, mute gunslinger, wearing *geta* and a thin *yukata*, he towered over the other actors, including notably Mifune Toshiro, more than a decade his senior and Japan's leading actor of the time. But the two of us stood practically eye-to-eye, which meant he had shrunk some over the years.

"I'll be 77 on Sunday, you know," he said as we sat down. "And the days aren't getting any longer." This took a little wind out of my sails because I was going to open with a question aimed at his birthday five days later on December 13th, both to signal that I'd done my homework and to break the ice regarding his current work. He was wearing a black cotton collarless long-sleeve shirt and a pair of black rayon athletic pants. His hair had been curled and tinted yellow, Naka-san having just completed a six-week road show of *MacBeth* in Japan, and though he had a bit of a paunch he looked reasonably fit. He sported a goatee.

"*Maa*," I said. "I was saving this for later, but I'm happy to give it to you now." I reached into my canvas case and pulled out the gift I had brought to commemorate both his birthday and the Scottish setting of Shakespeare's famous play. I passed it across the table to him.

"*Akete ii desu ka?*" he asked. "May I open it?" In Japan, gifts are traditionally not opened in the presence of the giver. "Of course," I said. He unwrapped it, glanced at the label and smiled, his eyes wide. "*Yabari, shinguru maruto desu ne!*" It was a quart of Macallan single-malt Scotch, aged 18 years. "*Dai suki desu.*" "I love it. Thank you very much."

We talked for a while about his beginnings as an actor in the 1950s. His father drove a hire car and ferried folks around, he told me. If you had a little money and wanted people to know it, you hired a private car and driver, not a taxi. Tokyo was not unlike New York in this regard. His family was poor, he said – nearly everybody was poor in the aftermath of the war. His mother worked too, on small billboards called *kanban* for a local pharmacy in Gotanda, another suburb of Tokyo. She used to take him to the movies on weekends when for a few yen they could watch the latest films. The Japanese director Ozu Yasujiro – already well known for his human dramas, the screenplays for which he wrote with his longtime collaborator, the novelist Noda Kogo – was highly popular in Japan in the late 1940s and ruled the big screen in Japan. Nakadai was particularly fond of *Tokyo Monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*, arguably Ozu's best), and Kurosawa himself was just coming into his own. His first really big hit, *Rashomon*, debuted in 1948, and was hugely successful when it played in

Europe and the United States in 1950. But the American director John Ford was a dominant presence in Japan too, with his classic Westerns, and Nakadai was hooked.

“When I graduated from high school,” he said, “in 1952, I enrolled in the fourth class of an acting school in Tokyo called Hayuza Yoseisho. I did all sorts of odd jobs to support myself and managed to land a few small acting parts too.” He laughed. “The first time my mother came to see me perform I had only a couple of lines, but after I said them she stood up in the audience and shouted, ‘That’s my little Tatsu-*chan!*’”

Trained in *butai geki* (stage drama), Naka-san then as now was more comfortable on stage than in film, though he landed some bit parts in early films by the director Kobayashi Masaki, who would become his mentor over time. “My breakthrough, as you know, came with the epic film *Ningen no Joken* (*The Human Condition*), based on the blockbuster novel by Gomikawa Junpei, which was a huge hit in Japan around 1958. Every major actor in Japan wanted to play the part of Kaji, the story’s protagonist, and they all lobbied hard for it. Perhaps too hard. Kobayashi *kantoku-san* said he wanted a certain look and I think he found it in my eyes.”

Nakadai’s eyes were legend. They were enormous and dominated his face, which was lean, almost bony. When you watch his early films, like *The Human Condition* or *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* or *Yojimbo*, you notice this remarkable feature instantly. Nakadai seemed to realize this as a young actor and used his eyes to wonderful effect in achieving remarkable expressions. They seemed much less prominent now.

“The role of Kaji was my first leading role in a film,” Naka-san went on. “And my acting career really took off from there.”

I saw the film three times before I ever picked up the book. *Ningen no Joken* is still in print in Japan, and I bought it while I was in Tokyo this time. It is not for amateurs. It’s three volumes totaling more than 1,500 pages and the author’s style as well as his use of older, unconventional *kanji* pose a formidable challenge for students of Japanese. But it’s a powerful antiwar story and was the first book about the war to be cleared by Japanese government censors. And the Japanese people were hungry for a compelling story about what happened when their army invaded and occupied Manchuria. Sadly, an English-language version of Gomikawa’s book was never published, or if it was it is long since out of print. Kobayashi’s cinematic masterpiece runs a total of nine and a half hours from start to finish – about three hours for each part – and there’s never a dull moment in it.

Ningen no Joken is a compelling and memorable story – unforgettable, really – about the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, the harshness of the army’s interaction with local Chinese, and the brutality of war, pitted against the idealistic, very human character of Kaji, a young and idealistic section chief at Manchurian Steel Works who persuades his boss (played by the late Yamamura So) to let him try softer, more humane management techniques with the Chinese in order to raise productivity and thus get more iron ore from the local mines. Needless to say, despite a Herculean effort on his part, Kaji fails, is drafted into the Japanese army (Part II), and becomes a POW (Part III) when the Russian army pours into Manchuria at the end of the war to claim it for the allies. “It’s not my fault I’m Japanese,” Kaji says at one point. “But it’s my worst crime that I am.”

I won't spoil the ending, but if you haven't seen the film, either vault it to the top of your Netflix queue or go to the Criterion Collection's website (www.criterion.com) and order a copy. It's a keeper. At the time, Tokyo, like Washington, didn't recognize Beijing as the legitimate government of China, so Kobayashi and his production team from the Shochiku studios were unable to shoot the film in China. They filmed the entire story on Hokkaido instead. You would never know. The dry landscape, the harsh weather, and the relatively wide-open spaces of Japan's northernmost island complemented the story perfectly. Both the director Kobayashi and the novelist Gomikawa had been conscripted into the army during the war and both served in Manchuria. Their experiences infuse and power the story. For his part, Gomikawa stubbornly refused all offers of promotion by his superiors and spent his entire time as a private in the infantry. His main character, Kaji, was the beneficiary. Though a work of fiction, the protagonist is inescapably human and real.

The Human Condition took two years (1959-61) to shoot. It was released part-by-part and set box office records in Japan that were not eclipsed until George Lucas screened the first episode of *Star Wars* in 1976. I asked Naka-san what he did between parts.

"You know, it took about six months to shoot each part of that film," he said. "So when we finished Part I, it took Kobayashi *kantoku-san* and his crew six months to prepare the sets for Part II, so we were all released to work on other films during the interim. [*Kantoku* means director in Japanese.] During the first break, I was recruited by Naruse Mikio *kantoku-san* to act in *Onna ga kaidan wo noboru toki* (*When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*). That film took us only four months to shoot, so when we finished it was time to start Part II with Kobayashi-san."

I said it was incredulous that he could play such an innocent role in *Onna* right after Kaji in Part I. How was this possible? From that role, I had always assumed it had been his first, so innocent was this character who depicted an ordinary barkeep in the Ginza district of Tokyo. But Naka-san said it was ideal for an actor to have two totally opposite roles back-to-back.

He had appeared in eleven of the director Kobayashi's films, in five by Kurosawa, and in three by Naruse. Nakadai's experience with Kurosawa has been well documented. Less so with Kobayashi and Naruse. How different were their personal styles?

Naka-san laughed. "You know, no two directors are the same. After a take, Kobayashi *kantoku-san* would never say, "Good job," or "Well done." He just wouldn't say anything at all about your performance. It was simply, "Cut!" and we would move on to the next scene once he was satisfied with the previous one. Naruse *kantoku-san*, on the other hand, might complement your performance in a scene, but he was always extremely vague about what he wanted. This made many of us quite frustrated. Despite persistent questioning, Naruse-san simply would not elaborate on what he was looking for so he would shoot a scene over and over again until he was satisfied. Naruse-san also used a unique shot-making technique involving a single camera. He would position the camera for a series of takes of just one character – me, for example – and someone on the crew would hold up a card that had a rough circle for a face drawn on it and a pair of smaller circles for eyes. The crew member would alter the position of the card to simulate where the other actor was supposed to be during that scene – my patron, played by Takamine Hideko, for example. I was to focus my attention on the card as if Takamine-san were there in person with me. Naruse would do a

dozen takes like this and then dismiss me, whereupon he would call Takamine-san to the set and do the same with her. Later, he would splice the takes together when the film was being assembled and edited just as if he had used two cameras and had both actors in place at the same time. It was a unique style, but in the final release you couldn't tell that the two actors hadn't been shot together in the same scene at the same time."

This was true. When I saw *Onna* for the first time, years ago, what Naka-san said was spot-on. There are a lot of scenes with Takamine and Nakadai sharing the camera and their interaction looked completely normal. Who would have guessed that it had been shot with a single camera? The film, made and released in 1960, is about a mama-san, played by Takamine, and her bartender/business manager, played by Nakadai, in a Ginza after-hours entertainment salon. It's a *mise-en-scène* about the role of women in postwar Japan, caught between their personal desires (for love, for companionship, for permanence) and their cultural obligations (to be dedicated to the nation's drive for economic growth, and to serve men by being subservient and submissive to them, always at their beck-and-call). Takamine played the role perfectly; as she moves through chance encounters with the men she serves, she gradually realizes that her individual needs will never be realized and that she's stuck in a permanent world of patience and persistence (*gambaru*) that is still a dominant cultural value.

Takamine Hideko was one of the most popular and experienced actresses in Japan at the time. She had earlier played the role of a single teacher in the highly-acclaimed *Nijushi no Hitomi* (*Twenty-four Eyes*), repeatedly ranked as one of Japan's ten best films. It was directed by another master, Kinoshite Keisuke, in 1954. Set on a small island in the Inland Sea and based on the novel of the same name by Sakae Tsuboi, it was another wartime story about a young teacher's unwavering commitment to her students, even as she sees them grow older and leave the island to fight in the war. Takamine-san was several years older than Nakadai. He told me she had been a dependable mentor to him as a young actor during the making of *Onna* – she was about 35 when he was just 28 – and regularly urged him to be as realistic as possible. When the script called for him to slap her, as he was required to do in one scene that captured their evolving personal relationship, she told him to make it real. So he did. He said he felt bad about it a long time after because he had slapped her so hard. But the scene worked, just as Takamine said it would, and she never held it against him.

I asked Naka-san about the studio system that was prominent in Japan back in the heyday of the great films. He thought for a minute and said, "I had a unique advantage, I think, in that I was not tied to any of the major studios because I had come up through *butai geki* (stage plays). So I was free to work with all the studios, and I did. Other actors, like Mifune Toshiro, for example, or Takamine-san herself, had to work with the studio they were tied to – in Mifune's case, Toei. The same was true for Toho, for Nikkatsu, for Shochiku, and so on. I think my ability to work with so many of the great directors was enhanced because I wasn't tied by contract to them. I worked with most of them, I think."

"Except Ozu-san," I said.

"Yes, except Ozu-san."

In a previous essay, I referred to this period as the Golden Age of Japanese film. The *Ogon Jidai*, in Japanese – 黄金時代. It was characterized not just by the sheer quantity of movies made – though that was true, too – but by the quality of the films, the unforgettable characters portrayed in them, and the stories themselves, characterized by compelling human drama, and the quality of the acting, orders of magnitude higher than anything we have seen from Japan since. Many of them, like *The Human Condition* and *Twenty-four Eyes*, were based on best-selling novels of the era, but many were created out of whole cloth by the directors and their perceptive screenwriters – Ozu Yasujiro with the novelist Noda Kogo, Kurosawa with his long-time scenarist, Hashimoto Shinobu. Kurosawa and Hashimoto were responsible for about a dozen films, all pitch-perfect.

When I asked Naka-san why, in his opinion, both the quality and quantity of Japanese films had declined during the past twenty years, he had this to say: “There was no TV in Japan when the great era of Japanese film really began, in the 1950s. In fact, TV was late in coming to Japan – it wasn’t until the Tokyo Olympics, in 1964, that television really began to take off. So we had the better part of twenty years – two decades, really – to establish a firm rapport with Japanese moviegoers. There were nearly eight thousand movie screens in Japan back then, I think, compared to what – maybe three thousand today?”

“About 2,500 as of last year.”

“You see? Plus there were no other real entertainment distractions then either. No *keitai denwa* [mobile phones], no video games, no computers, no Internet, nothing! We had a captive audience, in effect. But once these other competing media were introduced and became popular, interest in film began to decline. And the directors, and their actors, too – like me – all got older. Ozu died in 1963 [on his birthday], at the age of 60. Too young. And gradually the public became used to more variety – they didn’t want to see the same actors and actresses all the time. I think I made my last film around 1982, if I remember correctly, when Kurosawa *kantoku-san* shot *Ran* [Shakespeare’s *King Lear* set in medieval Japan]. I had just turned fifty, and it was a challenge for the crew to make me look like a man of eighty, with wrinkles around my eyes, weathered skin, and white hair. After that, I turned my attention back to the stage and have been doing *butai geki* exclusively ever since. For me, too, films started getting a little boring compared to the challenge of acting live, every day, on stage. Well –” he laughed – “I just finished *MacBeth*, you know, and I’ll start rehearsing for another play sometime early next year.”

He was scheduled appear in a Japanese production of Carlo Goldoni’s *Il Servitore di due Padroni* (*The Servant of Two Masters*) starting in March. Somehow I couldn’t see the Japanese being as drawn to the 18th-century Italian dramatist as they are to Shakespeare. I asked him how long he wanted to keep acting.

Naka-san laughed again. “Not so easy to say,” he said. “But you do start feeling the effects of age – endurance, strength, patience. There was a time when I wanted to just keep going forever, but now I’ll be happy if I can continue until I’m 80.”

“And then?”

“*Nombiri shite.*” Kick back and relax. “I feel I have nothing left to prove.”

“But do what? Acting has been the core of your life for such a long time.”

He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. “I enjoy traveling,” he said, “and I’d like to do more before I get too old. And reading. When I’m working, I never have time to read. I think I’ll find enough to do to keep me busy.”

Just then, he took out a pen and scribbled a character on a page in my notebook. “You know, it’s considered good luck to reach the age of 77,” he said. “This *kanji* reflects that spirit, so I consider myself very fortunate to be there.” At the top was a pyramid of three compressed strokes above the symbol for a tree. But Naka-san had slightly mis-imagined the strokes at the top, writing them as a pyramid of small sevens – 七 . A *kanji* with a stack of compressed sevens doesn’t exist. It’s actually three *nu* strokes from *katakana*, one of Japan’s stylized phonetic alphabets, which looks like this – ㄨ . The character itself is rendered thus – 桑 . Pronounced *kuma*, it means mulberry. It’s not one of the 2,000 *Joyo* (common use) *Kanji*, but it does make a wonderful story because if you tilt your head slightly to the right the *nu* symbol ㄨ does in fact resemble the Arabic numeral seven, written European-style.

The actor still looked pretty fit, so I asked him if he had a preferred fitness routine – jogging, for example, or working out – and if he adhered to a specific nutrition or diet.

He unfolded his hands and rested his elbows on the table, his eyes straight at me. “You know,” he said, “I used to jog a lot, but then I started to get a little arthritis in my joints so I had to stop. For a stage actor, the legs and hips are critical. You’re standing erect and moving all the time. So I started swimming. There’s an indoor pool nearby and I try to swim once or twice a week.” He paused. “What was the other question?”

A senior moment. How familiar. “Food,” I said.

“Oh, yes.” He laughed again. After more than an hour, he still seemed to be in a good mood. “I live alone now as you know [Naka-san’s wife, Miyazaki Ryoko, an actress too and a year older than he, died about a decade ago, of cancer]. Every day, my staff brings me with what they think I should be eating, so I do okay. I no longer smoke, and I drink less than I did when I was younger” – he picked up the quart of Macallan again – “I look forward to this! But no special diet to speak of.”

I asked him what the key difference was between acting in film and on the stage.

Without a moment’s hesitation, he said, “*Serifu.*” Dialogue. “It’s mostly about voice, about projecting.” He startled me when barked a couple of lines – “*Tke!*” (Go!), “*Yatte kure!*” (Do it!) – in a deep baritone with amazing projection from deep within his broad chest. I felt his power push me back in my chair. In an instant, his character had changed, without warning. It was impressive. I said it reminded me of a scene in *Harakiri*, another of his films directed by Kobayashi Masaki, when he surprised a feudal chamberlain thus: “*Go-karo!*” My lord!

I asked if that was an example of what he had meant by *serifu*.

Nodding, he said, “When we shot *Harakiri* all the actors were miked, of course, but in one scene with Mikuni Rentaro, who played the chamberlain in the Iyi clan, he said his lines in a normal tone of voice, while I was about ten meters away, squatting on *tatami* – I was a *ronin* [an unemployed *samurai*], don’t forget – and Mikuni-san was sitting beyond me on a raised platform, symbolizing his position of superiority. As a stage actor, I naturally projected my lines in order to bridge the wide gap between us. After a single take, Mikuni-san stood up and said, ‘You know, we’re miked. You don’t have to shout.’ So we started debating the art of the proper voice level until, after about an hour, Kobayashi *kantoku-san* threw his hands in the air and said, ‘Enough! We’re not going to resume shooting until you resolve this issue, and I don’t care how long it takes!’ ”

Naka-san leaned back and laughed. “It took us two days. When we told Kobayashi-san that we had reached consensus, he didn’t even bother to ask how. He simply said, ‘Yoshi’ [good] and we started shooting again as if nothing had happened.”

“So how did you resolve it?”

“I don’t really remember. We eventually reached some kind of compromise. I agreed to drop my voice level a bit, I think, even though Mikuni-san still felt I was too loud. But we finished the film without any further controversy.”

“*Harakiri* was a huge hit at Cannes.”

“It was. I think it was the first time [this was 1963] a European audience had seen *seppuku* [ritual suicide] on a big screen. The women were shocked. They screamed and turned away when Ishihama-san [Ishihama Akira, playing Nakadai’s son-in-law in the story] committed suicide with his bamboo knife.”

“And bit off his tongue, too. There was a lot of blood in that scene.”

“Yes, then too. Many people in the audience walked out of the screening room, in fact. They said it was too brutal.” Naka-san raised his bushy eyebrows. “All of us in the cast, including Kobayashi *kantoku-san*, were wearing traditional *kimono* dress, which I think made the cultural contrast seem even sharper. But we won the Special Jury prize!”

Harakiri was nominated for the Palme d’Or that year but lost to *The Leopard*, by the Italian director Lucino Visconti.

Nakadai made one film with the director Teshigahara Hiroshi, best-known for his 1964 black-and-white masterpiece *Suna no onna* (*Woman in the Dunes*), an allegorical story based on the best-selling novel by Abe Kobo about a man and a woman destined to spend their lives shoveling sand to avoid being buried. Lyrical and sensuous, with a haunting score by Takemitsu Horu, it won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes too that year and marked the director’s breakthrough on the international scene. The cinematography is unforgettable.

Naka-san was Teshigahara’s protagonist in a similarly existential film he shot two years later called *Tanin no kao* (*The Face of Another*). The story, scripted by Abe Kobo himself after his novel of the same name, revolves around a young man (played by Nakadai) whose face is

disfigured in an industrial accident, a chemical experiment gone wrong. With his face completely wrapped in gauze, his friends avoid him, his wife rejects him, and his life is generally miserable until his doctor crafts a mask molded from the face of a total stranger and fits it to Naka-san's face. He subsequently tries to seduce his wife, successfully but with wrenching emotional consequences that eventually lead him to take the life of the doctor who he blames for the anger that has begun to consume him. As a *shinpa* (new wave) film, it was a huge hit in Japan but widely panned overseas.

I asked Naka-san why.

“*Maa*,” he said. “I’m not sure. We were excited because it was very popular here and had a long run in the theaters. That was about the time – let’s see, in 1966 I was just 34 – when existentialism had become a fad among the intellectual class, based on the popular writings of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre in France. But Teshigahara *kantoku-san* was devastated by the negative reaction in America and Europe and didn’t make another movie for nearly twenty years.”

“I have a theory,” I said. Naka-san moved closer now, a quizzical look on his face. “The French can be quite arrogant, you know – the British too, for that matter. That was the New Wave of cinema in France – Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol. They broke through, rejecting the classical approach to filmmaking and stressing their own individual, iconoclastic styles. So when Teshigahara made *Kao*, in a modern urban setting in Japan with a plot that had *shinpa* overtones, the French simply couldn’t believe that a Japanese director could impart such a strong existentialist sentiment, so they rejected it. Maybe they were angry because they thought that Teshigahara was trying to imitate their own style.”

Naka-san thought for a minute and said, nodding, “There’s a long history of rejection of Japan by the West, you know. This goes all the way back to Meiji [1868], when we emerged from the *samurai* era of Tokugawa and began to modernize. Even then, foreign interest in Japan focused on *samurai* and Zen and [the woodblock artists] Hiroshige and Hokusai, the classical Japanese arts, you know, not with our modern steel mills or shipyards or railroads. Maybe the same sentiment applied to film.”

A perceptive comment. Already by the mid-18th century, Japan’s literacy rate was higher than England’s, thanks to the *terakoya*, schools run by Buddhist temples throughout Japan. But the West persisted in seeing Japan as a fascinating but backward country, in part because of the writings of one particular Irishman, Lafcadio Hearn, who moved to Japan in the late 19th century, learned Japanese, took the Japanese name Koizumi Yakumo, and popularized (in English) many historical legends and ghost stories that idolized Japan’s past. One particular collection of stories, called *Kwaidan* (怪談), was made into a gorgeous, full-color film by Kobayashi Masaki in 1964, with Nakadai appearing in one of the four segments. It won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes in 1965 and was nominated for an Academy Award.

Time was running short. We adjourned to the acting studio for some pictures. Only then did I notice that Naka-san was not wearing indoor slippers like the rest of us. Instead, he wore a pair of what looked like New Balance new-age new-contour walking shoes, all black, with curved soles that enabled him to kind of “roll” forward instead of walk. Not for

nothing did this ageing actor take his legs and hips seriously. Unlike so many celebrities, he didn't just talk the talk.

One of Nakadai's actors-in-residence took a few shots of us standing together in front of a series of posters highlighting a few of the famous actor's most recent stage performances (but strangely, no films). I asked him how Mumeijuku was doing.

"It's not so easy any more," he said, frowning. "Not that it ever was easy, mind you, but there are far fewer acting jobs now than in my day. We have our share of eager learners – there are about a dozen young men and women studying here now – but many of them can't afford to stay in residence long enough because they have to work to support themselves. Some of them work in retail stores, some drive delivery vans, some are employed in their family's business. Because of the decline of the studio system – Nikkatsu is gone, Toei acquired Shochiku from Toho more than a decade ago, and Toho mostly does *anime* [animated features] now. *Kaiju* (horror, long a popular genre in Japan) is virtually dead. So the opportunities for young actors today are either on the stage – which is in decline too, except for traditional *kabuki* – or on TV, with production companies run by Fuji or NHK. Even there you need patrons – meaning commercial advertisers – with deep pockets. And the Japanese economy is still fragile, so there aren't as many options these days."

We left the studio and padded back toward the *genkan*. Or at least, I padded. Naka-san rolled. I asked him about his relationship with Mifune Toshiro, if they got along on the set in movies they made together, whether they had become friends. They appeared in numerous films, starting with *Yojimbo* in 1961 and including, memorably, *Dai Bosatsu no toge* (*The Sword of Doom*) and *Jo-i uchi* (*Rebellion*). But not in *Goyokin*.

"*Goyokin*," Nakadai recalled with a chuckle, "was to be shot during winter in Yamagata prefecture, in the north, on the Japan Sea, one of the coldest parts of Japan. Mifune-san got sick and decided he couldn't do the role. He recommended me to replace him, so the director, Gosha Hideo, offered me the role of Magobei. This was about Showa 44 [1969], I think. All I remember about that film is that it was *very* cold the whole time. Snow everywhere – strong winds, bitter cold, shooting outdoors, always outdoors. They had special warming huts set up to prevent frostbite. I've never been so cold, except perhaps during my final scenes as Kaji, when we were in Hokkaido in winter."

Magobei, Naka-san's character, is a retired *samurai* who battles his brother-in-law, played meticulously by the late Tetsuro Tamba, one of the Japanese film industry's great villains. The story takes place in mid-Tokugawa, around 1750. It's about a government (*bakufu*) ship full of gold that Tamba's character attempts to hijack and then murder the local villagers to keep them from talking. Needless to say, Magobei saves the day. The first *samurai* film to be shot in Panavision, *Goyokin* benefited from a stellar cast, including the late Nakamura Kinnosuke, a star *kabuki* actor from the famed Osaka acting family of the same name, and Asaoka Ruriko, a young singer-turned-actress who was born in Manchuria to Japanese parents. She debuted in film at the age of 14 and became enormously popular in her time.

"In the few films where Mifune-san and I worked together," Nakadai went on, "we didn't spend that much time together. He was really *mukuchi*, so there wasn't a lot of interaction

between us on or off the set.” [*Mukuchi* means reticent. The *jukugo* is 無口. Literally “no mouth.”] “When the cast got together after a shoot, Mifune-san might open up a bit after some *sake*, but basically he kept a low profile. He was, don’t forget, the best-known, most popular and most admired actor in Japan in his time. Once he formed his own production company, though, he stopped working with Kurosawa *kantoku-san*. One of his first independent films was *Taiheiyō no Jikoku* (*Hell in the Pacific*) with the Hollywood actor ...”

“Lee Marvin, 1968.”

“*So*. He made quite a few films after that but none so memorable as those he did with Kurosawa-san. His last picture was more than ten years ago, I think.” [*Fukai Kawa* (*Deep River*), directed by Kumai Kei, in 1995. Mifune died in 1997.] “In Showa 40 [1965], Kurosawa-san had him grow a full beard for *Akabige* (*Red Beard*). It took Mifune-san nearly a whole year and his production company suffered during that time. After *Akabige*, the director and the actor parted company. I guess I can say this now, but in public, they not only were not speaking, they disparaged each other’s films.” [Kurosawa and Mifune collaborated on sixteen films; Mifune made a total of 134, of which 70 won awards.]

When Japanese date the years, they always start with the year the Emperor ascends the throne. This has been true throughout Japanese history. In the 20th century, for example, Emperor Hirohito took the throne in 1925. His era was christened Showa – 昭和 – the era of peace and harmony. (Sometimes the irony can be stark.) So 1965 was Showa 40, 1969 Showa 44, and so on. My first stay in Japan was during Showa 42 (1967). You see this dating system on all Japanese publications – books, newspapers, magazines. Hirohito died on January 7, 1989 – barely Showa 64. His son Akihito ascended on January 8, so 1989 became Heisei 1 (平成 一), the era of achieving humility. (Not bad.) So this year, 2009, is Heisei 20. And so it continues.

As we stood talking, I asked Naka-san about some of his other notable co-stars, like Yamamura So. Yamamura, at the time a much older and more recognizable actor than Nakadai, played the role of Kaji’s superior at Manchurian Steel in *The Human Condition*.

“Yamamura-san was a good mentor to me as a young actor. Even though I had this ‘heroic’ role as Kaji, he would pull me aside to caution me about changing the *serifu*. One time I asked Kobayashi *kantoku-san* if he had any objections to my saying, for example, ‘*So da*,’ (yeah) instead of ‘*so desu*’ (that’s right), which was in the script. He said he had none, but Yamamura-san told me very sternly that the script writer – in this case, Gomikawa-san himself, the novelist and author of the original work – had created the dialogue for a reason. He said I should leave it alone and not change it. So I didn’t. And I remained grateful to him ever since for that advice.”

As we moved to the front door to say goodbye, I asked him as an afterthought if he uses bodyguards when he goes out in public. He laughed again.

“When I walk around the neighborhood here in Setagaya,” he said, “sometimes I use a cane, you know, because of the hills, so most people probably think I’m just another *jiisan* [old

guy]. But younger Japanese, most of whom haven't seen my films anyway, would have no idea who I am. So I have no reason to be afraid. I'm happy to go out on my own."

As we bowed our goodbyes, a shiny black Nissan limo pulled up and purred to a stop. The driver got out and quickly opened the other three doors. Four suits emerged, bearing gifts. Nearly mid-December, the *bonenkai* – year-forgetting parties – were imminent. The initials on the driver's door, in gold, said "NHK," Nippon Hoso Kyokai. NHK is Japan's equivalent of the BBC. PBS would be our closest equivalent, but PBS doesn't underwrite classic films the way the BBC and NHK do. NHK was currently shooting a TV drama series called *Yama no ue no kumo* [The Clouds above the Mountain] just northwest of Tokyo in the small town of Kawagoe – popularly known as *Ko Edo*, Little Edo – because so much late 18th- and 19th-century original architecture still remains. *Yama no ue no kumo* is an early 20th-century story about Japan's modernization efforts in the wake of victory over Russia.

"*Tsugi no*," Naka-san said with a shrug. "My next meeting." We shook hands. I thanked him a second time, bowed again briefly, and stepped aside to watch him greet the broadcasting company's execs. Then they disappeared inside.

As I walked back downhill toward the bus stop to catch the bus that would ferry me back to Futago-Tamagawa station, I thought more about the *Ogon Jidai*, Japan's Golden Age of film. Naka-san's reason for the rise and fall of film having to do with technology – TV, PDAs, mobile phones, and the like – was valid as far as it went. But I felt there was another factor too, a human factor, that was such a critical part of the dramatic and compelling stories that were made into film in Japan half a century ago. A human factor that by contrast seems remarkably absent from Japanese film today (and from ours, as well).

Film is a metaphor for life: Japan was devastated by the war, the US emerged unscathed. During the 50s and 60s, Japan gradually became a phoenix risen from the ashes, and Japanese film during this time consisted of real stories about real people. Poignant, compelling, deep, full of the fiber of life. The Japanese people worked hard, six days a week, twelve or fourteen hours a day, rebuilding. Shocked and embarrassed by their defeat in the war, they worked feverishly in part to put the past behind them. Their films were inspired by stories of discipline and sacrifice and patience and persistence and the age-old Japanese sense of *mono-no-aware*, unavoidable fate – it can't be helped, there's nothing we can do but soldier on. In the 20th century, for us, not even Tennessee Williams or Edward Albee comes close; John Steinbeck perhaps (*The Grapes of Wrath*), Hemingway maybe (*The Sun also Rises*), single-novelist Margaret Mitchell (*Gone With the Wind*), all converted seamlessly into classic films for a broad audience. The Golden Age had Ozu and Kurosawa and Kobayashi and Naruse and Ichikawa Kon, masters of unforgettable stories with compelling characters and great acting.

Yet when you look at a typical list of contemporary Japanese movies screening today, it's hard to feel that same degree of *human* involvement that characterized the great films of Japan's recent past. Here is a brief list of some of the most recent movies released in Japan, with the names of their directors and principal actors and a short synopsis of their plotlines. Hollywood has far too much influence on Japanese film today. None of the films in this list will ever screen in the US or Europe, unlike the great films of the Golden Age. By contrast, today's films from Japan seem better fodder for daytime soaps than serious cinema.

20th Century Boys, directed by Tsutsumi Yukihiro, with Karasawa Toshiaki and Toyokawa Etsushi. A virus of pandemic proportions disguised as a clown threatens modern Tokyo and only the 20th Century Boys can stop it.

April Bride, directed by Hiroki Ryukai. A story about love, marriage, cancer, and commitment.

Boys Over Flowers, directed by Ishii Yasuharu with Matsumoto Jun. When a teen's tiara is stolen, it takes an adventure to get it back.

Calling Out Love in the Center of the World. Sakutaru goes to the island of Shikoku in the Inland Sea to search for his fiancée Ritsuko, but memories of Aki, his high-school classmate, come flooding back. Directed by Yukisada Isao, with Osawa Takao and Shibaasaki Kou.

Flowers in the Shadow, directed by Hirakawa Yuichiro, with Okada Junichi and Hirayama Aya. Five strangers are thrust together in the aftermath of a terrible typhoon.

Glorious Team Batista, directed by Nakamura Yoshihiro, with Hiroshi Abe and Takeuchi Yuko. Three heart surgeries fail, prompting an internal investigation.

Tsubaki Sanjuro. Samurai battle a corrupt local magistrate, helped by an honorable *ronin*. Directed by Morita Yoshimitsu, with Oda Yuji and Matsuyama Kenichi. Lots of shouting and amateurish acting, worse even than my high school rendition of *Annie Get Your Gun*. A shadow of Kurosawa's masterpiece starring Mifune and Nakadai. Somebody, somewhere must be wondering what the director was thinking. Surely I can't be the only one...

The Vulture. Fund managers compete head-to-head in contemporary Tokyo. Directed by Otomo Keishi, with Omori Nao and Matsuda Ryuhai. Not even a shadow of *Wall Street*.

And so it goes. *Jidai geki* – historical drama – is a deep tradition in Japan – period pieces taken from the richness of the country's long history, from the fabric of its deep culture. We never seem to come close: mid-century, we had a preoccupation with Westerns which were superficial by comparison and both prejudicial and exclusionary in scope, with a few notable exceptions. The *samurai* films of Japan were comparable: *chambara* stories of clanging swords for the most part but from a more classical tradition. As directors, John Ford (and maybe John Huston) come closest to Kurosawa and Ichikawa in terms of quality and context. They were certainly the most emulated by the Japanese.

But with a few notable exceptions like *Saving Private Ryan* or *Schindler's List*, both not coincidentally brought to the screen by Steven Spielberg, a long list of story lines is missing from our own *jidai geki*. Even these two were relatively modern, set in the context of World War II. We've never done a really decent film about our Puritan bigot founders, for example, or their fellow commercial profiteers, or about the corruption of Reconstruction or lynching, or the mid-19th-century big-time robber baron Jay Gould or John Calhoun of South Carolina and the events leading up to the secession proclamation in December 1860, or the palpable hatred between Senate Majority Leader and Boston Republican Henry Cabot Lodge and New Jersey Democrat Woodrow Wilson that doomed the League of Nations, or FDR's scandals, any one of which puts the lie to the myth of American exceptionalism.

We need more films in the spirit of Ozu Yasujiro's *Tokyo Story*, still in Japan's Top Five, which so movingly depicts intergenerational relationships through the inexorable march of time. Or Samuel Fuller's *The Steel Helmet* (1951), the first film to depict the Korean war as it was, not afraid to take on the racism and bigotry displayed by American GIs. Today, instead, we get high-end digital effects and high-tech morphing and high-decibel sound. But the *story* is absent, orphaned arguably by affluence. Hollywood's films are increasingly targeted at extended adolescents in our advanced industrial societies, Europe and Japan included, for one and only one reason: box office receipts. Money is what our societies are now all about. Reality shows that have nothing to do with reality, airwaves inundated with commercials, advertising on every visible square inch of outdoor space. For sports programming, we might as well run commercials non-stop and interrupt them only when a team scores. Not that this is anything new. Half a century ago, the satirist Stan Freberg's hit song said it all: "Hark the Herald Tribune sings, advertising wondrous things...."

As I boarded the bus back to Futago-Tamagawa station, I thought back to my two-hour meeting with Yamazaki Tsutomu in late September. Our conversation had been more relaxed and personal, I think, because it took place of an evening over sushi and beer. We both felt a kind of informal bonding then, capped with a bro' shake. Today's discussion, while highly informative, seemed less personal somehow, conducted as it was at mid-day under the harsh glare of fluorescent lights with a stimulant (coffee) instead of lubrication.

But Naka-san was gracious and friendly and hospitable, and today was another memory to be cherished. Nakadai had never been a particularly charismatic film actor, like Mifune, but he was certainly prolific and popular. Though he was the recipient of no academy awards (unlike Yama-san, who has four), Nakadai did receive numerous Best Actor awards by *Kinema Junpo*, a media event similar to our Golden Globes. Several films in which Nakadai starred won many academy awards too – in Japan, in the US, and at Cannes – though primarily for their acclaimed directors (*Yojimbo*, *Tsubaki Sanjuro*, *Kagemusha*, *Harakiri*, *Kwaidan*, *Ran*, et.al.). Still, Nakadai was the first actor ever to be awarded the *Bunkasho* by the Japanese government for Distinguished Service to the Culture of Japan, which he received in 2007.

As I descended at Futago-Tamagawa, I kicked myself for not having begun this process a decade earlier. The well-known actors Mifune, Tamba, and Nakamura are all dead now, as are their famed directors – Ozu, Kurosawa, Kobayashi, Teshigahara, Naruse, Kinoshita. Ichikawa Kon passed away in February last year at the age of 92. His documentary *Tokyo Olympiad* still shines. I would love to have met and spoken with each one of them.

But Asaoka Ruriko is still with us. Now 69 and retired, she was a favorite of Kurosawa. Hara Setsuko, too, is 89 years young and living in Kamakura. She was Ozu Yasujiro's lead actress in most of his films, as the late Ryu Chishu had been his male lead. This series of essays needs a woman's perspective next. It may have to be Ruriko-san, though, because my friends tell me Setsuko-san is refusing interviews with the media, having turned her back on her acting career when she retired, saying she never liked making movies in the first place.

I don't believe it. Maybe there's a chance for a crazy *gaijin* to crack open the door.