

A Conversation with Yama-san

山崎努様との話

Steve Schlosstein

I didn't really know what to expect.

When I wrote to the actor Yamazaki Tsutomu's office back in July, requesting an hour-long interview, part of me thought I'd never get a response. Those of you who read my essay titled *Missing Itami Juzo: the Decline of Japanese Film*, will remember that Yamazaki played the lead role in the first three films Itami directed: *The Funeral*, *Tampopo*, and *A Taxing Woman*. He won Best Actor Awards from the Japan Academy for *The Funeral* and *A Taxing Woman*, and after the director Itami died in a tragic suicide a collection of interviews with the key cast and crew from his films was published. Titled *Itami Juzo's Films*, it had a long interview with Yamazaki – popularly known as Yama-san – which I translated and included as part of that essay. (You should have it but if you don't, let me know and I will send you a copy.)

Just prior to writing him, I had acquired a new Japanese word processing application called NJ Star Japanese, developed in Australia (of all places) by Japanese linguists who knew that there might be a market for this kind of software overseas. It had been available in Japan, in various versions, for more than twenty years, but available only for use with the Japanese edition of Windows – which I had used from time to time – or with dedicated operating systems developed in Japan by Japanese computer manufacturers like Toshiba and NEC. It has an enormous vocabulary and three conversion algorithms, enabling a *gaijin* (foreign) writer like me to type a Japanese word using a standard QWERTY keyboard – like *Nihon*, for example, which means Japan – and an assortment of characters, called *kanji*, or ideographs, appears at the bottom of the screen.

Using Japanese word processing software assumes a working knowledge of the language of course. When you identify the correct *kanji* among the list, you simply click on it and it's inserted automatically in the text stream. *Nihon*, then, appears as 日本. Yamazaki Tsutomu is 山崎努. Yama-san becomes 山さん, and so on. This is NJ Star's most powerful conversion algorithm: it converts a Japanese word spelled with the Roman alphabet (ours) into *kanji* (theirs). The other two algorithms enable conversion into *hiragana* (ひらがな) or *katakana* (カタカナ) – Japan's two phonetic alphabets – and into standard ASCII characters as well.

Long story short, I wrote a two-page letter to Yama-san in July (copy attached) proposing an interview in Japanese. As I half-expected, nothing happened. After about a month, still no response – no return fax, no phone call, no ping on my Website. But I had had the foresight to mention my old friend Ashiba Munekiku, now general manager of the *Kokusai Bunka Kaikan* (International House) in Tokyo, where I've been a member for more than 30 years, as a local contact, and sure enough, in due course I had a ping from Ashiba-san with word from Yama-san's assistant, a Miss Shinjo, that he had consented to a one-hour meeting during my next trip to Tokyo in September, date and time to be confirmed after my arrival.

This was exciting news. Yamazaki has long been a favorite actor of mine. His films are consistent box office hits in Japan if not overseas, and I was tickled to death. To celebrate, I

danced a little jig like the one he did as the character Gondo in *A Taxing Woman* (which was subsequently adopted and popularized by young Japanese as a jazz dance step). I could hardly wait for September, to be in Japan again and to call Miss Shinjo to confirm the time and place for my interview with Yama-san.

My arrival in Tokyo coincided with a pair of consecutive national holidays (*renkyu*), so it turned out I wasn't able to reach her until my third day there. I was leaving for Nagoya that afternoon and would be in Kyoto for the weekend, so what had started out as a ten-day window suddenly became three. On my first call that morning, there was no answer – not even voicemail – which I quickly ascribed to life in the film business. After all, I thought, who works before noon? So I tried again from Tokyo station prior to boarding the mid-afternoon Nozomi super-express for Kansai (western Japan).

Good news: I connected. Not-so-good news: it was voicemail.

Leaving messages in any foreign language is never easy because you never know how much time the system will give you, so to make sure you get everything in you resort to shorthand. Japanese is no different. I left Shinjo-san a cryptic message, gave her numbers where I could be reached while I was out of Tokyo, and crossed my fingers that this was all going to work.

When I checked in to the Royal Park Inn in Nagoya two hours later, a message from Ashiba-san was waiting. Taking the more familiar route, Miss Shinjo had called him directly to confirm Wednesday, September 30th – my last day in Tokyo – for the meeting with Yama-san. It was to take place in Oyama-dai, a suburb of Tokyo, at 6pm. I suddenly grew anxious because there was no fallback – if Wednesday fell through for any reason, like Yama-san forgets to show up. Thursday, departure day, was out. But I called Ashiba-san right away to accept and asked him to get directions for me so I could take the right train(s) to Oyama-dai.

It took two transfers and three trains and about an hour – from Roppongi to Nakameguro via the Hibiya line, across the platform for the Tokyu Toyoko line to Jiyugaoka, then downstairs, under the tracks and up a flight of stairs for the Oimachi line to Oyama-dai. To be absolutely certain I wouldn't muck this up, I got there about an hour early to scope out the neighborhood. Southwest of Tokyo, Oyama-dai is a small town; Tokyo evolved into the huge metropolis it is by expropriating small towns just like it over the years.

There's a small main street – closed to traffic from 4pm to 7pm every day – along which is the usual assortment of Japanese shops and stores: a butcher (*nikuya-san*), a fish store (*sakanaya-san*), a vegetable market (*yasaiya-san*), an assortment of soba and sushi and yakitori shops, a locksmith, a haberdasher, three mini-markets like Lawson's and Seven-11 (owned by Itoh-Yokado, a major Japanese retailer), a florist, a flourishing Haagen-Dazs, and a hardware store (*kanamono-ya*). I figured maybe Yama-san was there on a shoot. The weather was unseasonably warm for late September in Tokyo – Nagoya and Kyoto had been just plain hot – but a cool breeze was blowing, the skies were overcast, and it was comfortable.

My instructions were to wait by the Oyama-dai station exit (there is only one, at the south end of the platforms); Miss Shinjo would be there to meet me at 5:45pm and take me to “a nearby *sobaya-san*” to meet Yama-san. So I did and she did and after we exchanged the requisite bows and business cards, I padded along after her to meet my favorite actor.

We entered the soba shop, ducking under the *noren*. I saw him immediately, sitting alone in a far corner nursing a beer. There was no one else there. I can't describe the feeling. Here was *The Man*, looking just as he had in all those films. Though he would soon turn 73, he looked at least twenty years younger. He was wearing a pair of Levi's and a black button-down shirt, the cuffs undone and rolled back once. There were no security goons around, no gauntlet of bodyguards, no flock of press assistants to steer the discussion. Just Yama-san himself, sitting quietly, drinking beer, a very down-to-earth, unassuming everyman, not a Big Ego decked out in Gianni Versace's latest eco-friendly Fashion Statement. How refreshing.

[Contrast this with the typical Hollywood types depicted by Tad Friend in his Letter from California column in the current (October 12th) issue of *The New Yorker*. "Call Me," the article is titled. It portrays many of Hollywood's actors as "jackasses who generally besmirch the fabric of civilization."]

I had rehearsed my opening line in the most honorific Japanese (*keigo*) a dozen times or more, testing it with Ashiba-san – *o-me ni kakaraimashite, koei de gozaimasu* (it is a great honor to meet you) – and I made sure to bow lower than he did (a sign of respect). He smiled and gestured for me to take a seat, turning straightaway to Shinjo-san. "*Saicho ichi-jikan desu ne?*" "He knows this will be an hour max, right?"

As she nodded, I told Yamazaki quietly that I had a dinner engagement in Tokyo myself at 8pm, so I would of course be mindful of his time constraints. I had prepared a list of maybe fifteen questions, half personal, half professional, and had tried some of them out on various I-House staff to make sure I had the proper Japanese equivalents in hand. The film industry, as with any specialty, has its own unique vocabulary that is used nowhere else. We "shoot" a film, for example; in Japanese, it's *satsuei* – to photograph – but used only for cinema.

Yama-san was quite lean, and since he was sitting I couldn't gauge his height. But I guessed him to be an inch or two shorter than I and maybe a few pounds lighter – 140, say. Given his youthful looks, I started by asking if he kept fit by jogging or cycling a couple of times a week or by spending time at the fitness center.

He laughed – how many times I had seen that laugh on screen! – and said, "None of the above." He lifted his bottle of Kirin, poured me a glass, took a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and said, "These account for my long life. My grandparents lived to the age of 93 and I have every expectation of doing the same." We toasted: *kampai*. I remarked that the world's oldest woman had recently died at the age of 115. She ate red meat every day and was a smoker, too. His eyebrows shot up and a big smile etched itself across his face.

The *sobaya-san* brought us some small, appetizer-sized dishes of soba, a little soy sauce, and a few pickles (*o-tsumame*). We snapped open our chopsticks and ate. One thing foreigners really don't understand is that you're *supposed* to make noise while eating soba, really *slurp* it into your mouth, which to us seems so impolite. I laughed as I did so, reminding Yama-san of that wonderful scene in *Tampopo* when Itami had a table full of Japanese men and women loudly slurping as the camera slowly panned, the mike obviously on high, capturing the cacophony in a long, hilarious take. *Tampopo* is literally a spaghetti Eastern.

I mentioned to Yama-san that his 73rd birthday was coming soon – it's December 2nd – and asked how age was affecting his work. He smiled again and said, “You know, I have often thought about that. I haven't done any stage acting for more than a decade because it is so tiring. You do the same thing day after day, every day, sometimes twice a day, in front of a live audience, and it takes a lot out of you. So around 1998 I made the decision to focus on film and have been making only movies ever since.”

Knowing he had graduated from Ueno School for the Arts in Tokyo instead of a normal high school, I asked if he had ever considered any profession other than acting. He shook his head. “When I was very young (*shonen no toki*), my family was very poor. At the end of the war, I was nine years old and I had to work every day – delivering newspapers, milk, *natto* (fermented soybean paste) – to help my parents make ends meet. My father died when I was fifteen. You have to remember that at the time, in defeat, after having suffered for so many years, The Japanese people hated *everything* Japanese – *sboji* (paper screens), *fusuma* (sliding outer doors), *geta* (wooden clogs), *kimono*, everything. It's true (*bonne*). My father instilled in me a strong sense of *saizen* (to do one's best), to take advantage of whatever talent you had – for me, it was acting – and not to pretend you could do something you couldn't (*tatema*).”

I asked him about the perceived decline in the quality of Japanese film. To me, the current crop of Japanese movie directors pales by comparison with the masters – Kurosawa, Naruse, Ozu, Ichikawa, Teshigahara, Kobayashi, Itami. Did he think this was a fair comment?

“Back then,” he said, nodding, “though we didn't know it, there really was a Golden Age (*ogon jidai*) of Japanese film. The directors you mentioned all came of age during the pre-war or wartime period. They were exposed to the harshness of life, to reality, more than you can imagine. Some, like Ozu Yasujiro and Ichikawa Kon, had been drafted and served in the army; Ozu went to Manchuria – we called it Manchukuo – and became a committed pacifist through his experience with a Buddhist monk there. A similar wartime experience strongly influenced Ichikawa too. Two of his early films – *Fire on the Plain* and *The Harp of Burma* – may be the most powerful antiwar movies ever made. Even Kurosawa himself used this raw coarseness in his early films, like *Rashomon* for example. By 1990, when the Japanese market collapsed, Japan had become affluent, secure and comfortable. You can definitely see the difference in the quality of films we've made in the last twenty years. And China, of course – who can deny the impressive work of Chinese directors like Kaige and Zhang?”

I noted that Yama-san had acted in three of Kurosawa's films himself – *Kagemusha*, *Red Beard* (*Akabige*), and *Heaven and Hell* (*Tengoku to Jikoku*). What did he remember from working with the director? What was it like?

“I was very young, of course – I had just turned thirty, I think – so it was quite a while ago,” he said, laughing. “But what still stands out in my mind is how *fast* time passed when we worked with him. You started every day with a new shooting script: you knew exactly where you were supposed to be, and when, and what lines you had, and so on. Kurosawa was a disciplined taskmaster. It was stressful. He was very strict; everything stayed on schedule. You never questioned anything – you didn't have to. He had it all under control. So despite the pressure you felt, everything happened so fast it just swept by and you forgot about it.”

I asked him about his most recent film, *Okuribito* (*Departures*, not yet on DVD but screening in-flight; I had seen it on my Continental flight ten days earlier when I scanned the list of on-demand Japanese movies). It is a story about a mortician and his young *deshi* (assistant), a cello player who had lost his job when the symphony he was with had been disbanded, another fallout of the recession. Released in late 2008 in time to qualify for Japan's Academy Awards, Yama-san won best supporting actor for his role as the mortician, a role that seemed very understated. I asked him why.

“When my wife passed away some years ago,” he said, looking away, “we had a most unpleasant experience with the funeral director. He was full of himself, very egotistical, and never really paid attention to what the family wanted. From that personal experience, I purposefully downplayed the role in this film to bring out the importance of family – putting the focus on the bereaved, where it belongs.”

Though *Departures* was a quite serious film, there was a notable scene of comic relief, when Yama-san's assistant – the cello player – washes the body of a deceased woman underneath a traditional kimono cover. When his hand passes over her midsection, he freezes, saying to Yama, “She has a *thing*.” This creates an impromptu discussion with the parents. Yama-san quietly asks them if they want their daughter buried as a woman or as a man.

The ponderous tone of the film prompted a question about Shakespeare. The Great Man's plays are quite popular in Japan, but they're always the heavies – Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear. Yama-san played Lear on stage thirty years earlier, so I asked him why the master's comedies were never reproduced here. Or the comedies of Noel Coward, for that matter.

“Oh, make no mistake, Noel Coward is very popular in Japan,” he said, brightening up. “*Private Lives* and *Blithe Spirit* both have had good runs in Tokyo. But they're in the minority, it's true. Maybe because Japanese society itself is so serious. One memorable thing about Itami-san's films is that he was really good about blending satire with his serious critique of modern Japanese culture.”

Had he traveled to New York or to London at any point to study Western drama?

“I once spent several weeks in London – a long time ago – to do just that, to study the feeling of drama there. I went to a lot of plays in the West End, learned a lot.”

What in particular had influenced him from that experience?

“Creativity, you know – stage acting is so different from film. You have to rely on spontaneity so much more. There's a script, of course, but you take more cues from your fellow actors on stage. You can't just stop a scene and re-do it, like with film. So every performance of the same play is always just a little different. And that's because – if you're alert – you take what's happening on stage and build on it, not just saying your lines.”

Last year, in 2008, *anime* – animated features – took two-thirds of box office receipts in Japan. I asked Yama-san why the genre seemed to be so popular here. By this time – we had been talking for about 40 minutes – he had started fidgeting with his cigarette pack. He

said, “I’d like to smoke. Let’s go to a bar. You want to come?” I pointed to my watch, reminding him of the time limit. He brushed it aside. A good sign.

We gathered up our stuff, Shinjo-san paid the proprietor, and we walked around the corner. Yama-san’s shoulders slumped. The bar was shuttered. *Teikyū* – its weekly holiday. Closed Wednesdays. Yama-san lost no time in leading us around another corner to a *sushi-ya*, where we climbed onto three stools at the counter and continued over more beer. But the *sushi-ya* had a no-smoking policy too. Resigned, he shrugged his shoulders and pocketed his smokes.

“Anime, yes,” he said. “You know, there’s a strong comic book (*manga*) tradition in Japan, which may have something to do with it. The anime characters and the plots are simple enough for young people to understand – they have to start somewhere, after all – so it’s not that surprising. Miyazaki, though, is an exception.” Miyazaki Hayao is the Walt Disney of Japan. He is the brilliant creator of animated adult features like *Spirited Away* (which won an Oscar in 2001 as Best Animated Feature), *Tonari no Totoro-chan*, and *Howl’s Moving Castle*.

Yama-san suddenly stopped, turned to me and asked, “You ok with sushi?”

“*Nandemo taberaru*,” I said. “I can eat anything.” This is code. It says two things: one, yes I can (eat anything), but two, I can also handle the informal passive unconjugated verb tense.

We both laughed. Yama-san twirled his fingers and asked the master to fix us up with a few pieces of *onigiri* – slices of raw fish on rice not wrapped with seaweed (which is *maki*), starting with *torigai* (shellfish). Then our conversation went something like this:

“Except *fugu*,” I said between bites. *Fugu* is blowfish. It can be poisonous.

“Excuse me?”

“Fugu,” I repeated. “Never eat it.” Every year, especially around New Year’s, a surprising number of Japanese people die from eating improperly prepared blowfish. If the chef is a rookie, his knife may nick the poisonous glands as he prepares it for cooking. Eat the poison, instant paralysis and death.

“But the liver!” Yama-san insisted, kissing his fingertips. “It’s the best! Right, *sensei*?” The sushi master, clearly no rookie, nodded in agreement. “Next time you come to Tokyo,” Yama-san went on, “we will have liver.”

Oh, boy.

I pulled out Itami’s book and asked the actor if he would write something on the page that had his (Yama-san’s) picture on it. He took the red felt-tip pen I gave him, thought for a minute, and wrote a few lines. With his cursive script, not uncommon, one character flows almost illegibly into the next. He read it back to me. “Meeting Itami Juzo was the most sublime thing in my life. It was sad that he left us so early. It couldn’t be helped. Yama.” (*Shikata ga nai*, a familiar expression for “fate,” the sense that nothing could be done.) Yama-san’s signature is the *kanji* for mountain (山), enclosed in a circled flourish.

Since we were talking about Itami, I asked Yama-san about the limp (*bikko*) he had created for the Gondo character, a *yakuza* (crime) boss in Itami’s film, *A Taxing Woman*. Did he bind his leg to keep it straight?

I knew it was one of his favorite subjects and he laughed as he thought about it. “No,” he said, “it was completely natural, but not easy. I had developed a similar limp for a character I was doing in *Pizarro*, a stage play by the British playwright Peter Schaffer [who also wrote *Equus* and *Amadeus*]. When I read the script for *Taxing Woman*, it seemed to fit Gondo. So I tried it out – even though Itami hadn’t scripted it – and when he saw it, he said ‘keep it.’”

I mentioned a point he had made when he did his long interview for the Itami book, about how Itami’s painstaking preparation for a film left no spontaneous openings for the actors, like a meticulously manicured garden that tolerated no weeds. No *zasso*. How, after a while, as much as he liked Itami, Yama-san had come to feel his scripts were “suffocating” him, and why he had appeared in only four of the director’s ten films.

Yama-san nodded, smiling. “*Zasso*,” he said. Weeds. “All life is *zasso*.”

Yes. We were quiet for a minute. I put Itami’s book away. Then I mentioned that I had heard Yama-san would star in a new film next month. Could he say anything about it?

“Sorry, but I really shouldn’t,” he said. “It hasn’t been publicly announced yet.”

“*Narubodo*. (Right.) So I take it you’re here in Oyama-dai for the shoot?”

Laughing, “No, no. I live here.”

Oops. “I thought you lived in Chiba.”

“Born and reared, yes. But Oyama-dai is smaller, quieter, more secluded. More my style.”

“So tell me about your personal interests – what do you like to do outside of work?”

He raised his glass again with a smile. “Work is what I do,” he said. “I love it.”

He asked me a question for a change, about my interest in Japan, so we talked about Tokugawa for a while. Also called Edo Japan, it lasted for nearly 300 years, from 1603 to the Meiji restoration in 1868. Because of Japan’s cultural isolation – no foreigners were allowed in and all Japanese were forbidden to leave – most of the country’s formidable cultural and institutional roots took hold during that period, up to and including Meiji. The Tokugawa era (徳川時代) is the main source of *jidai geki* – period drama – that has provided material for popular plotlines in countless Japanese films like Kurosawa’s *Yojimbo* or *47 Ronin* by Ichikawa. Yama-san asked if my books were available in Japanese, and when I nodded he said, “Send me one,” then to Shinjo-san, “Let me know when it comes.” I had a particular title in mind – *Trade War* – a bit outdated now but the Japanese title, *Nihon wa warukunai* – *It’s Not Japan’s Fault* – made it a bestseller in Tokyo when it was released there in 1986.

Suddenly he put his left hand on the counter, reached across and put my left hand next to it. “Shinjo-san, look. Is this amazing or what? Our hands are almost the same.” (After all that beer, I wasn’t surprised.) This wasn’t code, but somehow I didn’t think it was acting either.

“Do you ever get to New York?” I asked.

“Actually, my daughter will be there this fall – she’s an actress, too.”

Chojo desu ka? Elder daughter? (She and Yama-san had shot a few commercials together.)

Jijo desu. (The younger).

To Miss Shinjo I said, “If there’s anything I can do while she’s there, let me know.” Then back to Yama-san. “You should come too,” I said. “I know you have lots of fans in New York. We could arrange an evening at the Japan Society for you.”

“*Sekkaku desu ga* (thanks for the offer) but I really can’t, given my new film schedule.”

“Right. So – any plans for retirement? More reading, more travel, something different?”

He laughed. I think laughter is his soul food. “I plan to keep working as long as I can.”

By the clock on the wall, it was nearly 8pm – two hours after we had started. Nobody had shot a cuff to glance at a watch. The conversation was flowing effortlessly (the beer, too), and Yama-san seeming so *relaxed*. I had the impression his usual interactions with foreigners were probably scripted, his interviews conducted through the intermediation of a translator. Set pieces, a manicured garden. This had been different, as much for me as perhaps for him.

Shinjo-san angled her head at the clock. Yama-san nodded. I understood. To the sushi master, I said, “*O-aiso negaimasu.*” The textbook term for “bill” is *kaikei* or *kanjo*. *Aiso* literally means affable or amiable, but when used at a sushi-ya (and only there), with the honorific prefix “o” it means “check, please.” It’s code too. You won’t find this definition in any dictionary, not even in Kenkyusha’s big five-pound hardbound reference shelf edition. It signifies that you’re a bona fide fan of sushi, a connoisseur – a *tsuu* (通).

Yama-san stopped, looked at me, looked at the master, chuckled and shook his head. From the expression on his face, it may have been the first time he’d ever heard a foreigner use this particular code.

He dipped his hand into a pocket for some yen. I put a hand on his arm as I dipped into a pocket myself. “My turn,” I said. “You treated soba.” This is a ritual, honored tradition too, but obligatory, like filling the other person’s glass instead of your own. We argued amiably – *aiso* – for a bit until it became clear that he was not to be denied. I pulled back and gave him the stage. This was his turf, not mine.

When we stepped out into the street, Yama-san seemed a bit disoriented as we descended the little stairs, turning left instead of right. Kirin’s fault, to be sure: we had consumed an enormous quantity of beer. Shinjo-san took his arm and steered him back.

I extended my right hand and said the only two words of English that night: “Thank you.” Yama-san took it, squeezed and said, “Thank *you*.” I rotated our hands into the bro shake, explaining that this was the handshake “brothers” used. He laughed and squeezed it again. Then he instinctively reached around with his left arm and hugged me about the shoulders. I reciprocated. It was a touching moment.

The Japanese people are tightly circumscribed by behavioral and cultural norms. It is a very conformist society, as you would expect of a nation so tightly packed on such a small island. There are four islands, in fact, but 90% of the population lives on the main island, Honshu, about the size of the state of California. Imagine half our population – 150 million people – living in California and you have some idea of the population density in Japan. *Everything* is packed – streets, trains, subways – *all* the time. “*Sushi-zume*,” the Japanese say. Packed like sushi. A major result, of course, is that there is great personal restraint – people hold back, they’re more formal, and proper behavior is heavily proscribed, as if scripted. Everybody follows the script, all the time. Otherwise, there would be constant chaos. Needless to say, Japan is characterized by nothing if not the marked absence of chaos.

But there are three categories of people who are generally accepted to be outside the norm of common behavior. One is children below the age of six. Japanese parents are incredibly tolerant of aberrant behavior by young children. They run, they taunt, they shout, they scream – to us outsiders (*gaijin*), they appear completely normal. Then, as they age, the cultural screws of behavioral expectation gradually tighten and tighten and tighten *again* until by adulthood these kids are all conforming to the broad norm.

The second group outside the norm is seniors – people over the age of sixty. They too can get away with a broader range of behavioral exceptions; they become more individualistic, both in dress and in manner, become “wet” with their emotions instead of “dry,” and are “forgiven” by the broad middle for their less conformist style. For us *gaijin*, older Japanese are easier to approach and to chat with because there is less “dishonor” in being seen cavorting with foreigners. They seem more open, too, and more willing to express honest opinions (*bonne*) than sticking to conventional, safer, more culturally accepted views (*tatema*). To us, they seem more “human.”

Then, too, people in the arts – the third group – whether visual artists who work with woodblock or silkscreen prints or photography or authors or sculptors or film actors, are outside the norm for their entire lives, not just during the two age-related periods. When we lived in Tokyo the second time, in the mid-1970s, my wife Marty wrote for an English-language monthly journal called *Art Around Town*. Once a month, on weekends, we would travel to remote regions of Japan so she could interview a visual artist for the magazine (with me along to translate). It was an eye-opening experience for us, meeting Japanese professionals who seemed so different from the business, government, and political types we spent most of our time with. Their casualness, their openness, their more “human” lifestyles and manner of speaking, were all apparent. They also seemed much more relaxed than their *sarariman* (salaried businessmen) counterparts, who were nothing if not quite uptight.

So I think there were elements of this at play during my meeting with Yamazaki. At 73, he was clearly outside the norm of standard conformist behavior and could be more relaxed. And as a professional artist, he was used to being exempt from the behavioral norm. He could say what he felt and not be criticized. He was open and honest with me, a *gaijin* he had never even met before. As a result, I felt, he was much warmer and more personable than a typical, middle-aged “conformist” Japanese whose personal style would have been “cooler” and more detached and whose behavior much more constrained. I felt a rare kind of bonding with Yama-san, of the sort I had seldom experienced during the past forty years of closeness to Japan. It was as exhilarating as it was exceptional.

“*Jaa, kondo Tokyo ni iru to, shirasete kudasai,*” Yama-san said. “Let us know next time you’re in town.” I promised I would. We said good night, turned and went our separate ways.

Shinjo-san and I walked quietly back to the station to wait for the next local for Tokyo. I asked her again to let me know if I could be of help to Yama-san’s daughter when she comes to New York, and she said she would. When the train came, we sat together and I asked her how long she had been working with The Man. “Twenty-seven years,” she said. She probably knew *to the day*. She must have been quite young at the outset – she looked no older than about fifty now, if that – so she’d been with him during the lion’s share of his film career. “What a wonderful life,” I said. She looked at me with tired eyes. From her perspective, I thought, perhaps not as exciting as one might imagine. Japan is still a male-dominant culture, unless you happen to be a pop music star or an actress.

We got off at Jiyugaoka, she to cross the platform for her connection to Shibuya, me to head upstairs for my train back to Roppongi. We bowed our goodbyes and promised to stay in touch. I said I would send her the Japanese edition of *Trade War*, as I had promised. She nodded, then waved, then disappeared in a tidal wave of passengers boarding the Toyoko line train. And then she was gone.

I took the stairs up to the Hibiya line and reached the packed platform just as a Tokyo-bound train was coming in. I surfed aboard on another wave of riders and grabbed a strap (*tsurigawa*) for the 30-minute ride back. My interview with Yama-san had gone a lot better than I had had any reason to expect, and my confidence level was up a notch.

Because of its deep history, Japan has a long tradition of declaring its most important artistic and architectural accomplishments as National Treasures (*kokuhō*) or Important Cultural Properties (*jūyō bunkazai*). You see them at virtually every major Buddhist temple or Shinto shrine. The Japanese government also created a category called Living National Treasures (*ningen kokuhō*). One of the first so-recognized was the *mingei* (folk) potter Hamada Shoji, who single-handedly put the little town of Mashiko on the map. Mashiko clay is mottled and fires to a dark brown or deep beige, stunning with a calligraphic glaze. We have several examples of *mashiko-yaki* at home and named one of our first cats, a calico, Mashiko, because of her coloration. If the Japanese government were to create a separate category for its most accomplished *film* artists, Yama-san would be a living national treasure, hands down.

So would Nakadai Tatsuya. Nakadai, at the age of 77 Yama-san’s peer and arguably Japan’s best-known living actor, is a veteran of more than 100 films including many by some of Japan’s best-known directors like Naruse, Toyoda, and Teshigahara. He starred or costarred in five films by Kurosawa, two by Ichikawa, and *eleven* by Kobayashi, including, most famously, his nine-hour three-film 1960 masterpiece *The Human Condition* (*Ningen no Joken*), probably Nakadai’s most accomplished work, based on the six-volume, multi-year novel of the same name by Gomikawa Jumpei. Nakadai-san was performing *Macbeth* on a regional stage far outside Tokyo in September, the reason he had been unavailable to see me.

But I had written to Naka-san, too. And his assistant, Miss Shimada, had just confirmed our interview for December 8th, during my next stay in Tokyo. With no imposed time limit.

I can't wait.

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Princeton, New Jersey

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S.B.S.

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私の一番すきな男憂「山さん」へ、

米国の東海岸で今年の春の天気あまり良くなくて、四月からほとんど雨ばかりです。ニューヨークの近辺では「梅雨」という季節がないのですが、今年から始まるようです。

さて、つい最近「伊丹十三の映画」という本を読み終わって、山崎さんのインタビュー(2)を中心にして「山さん」のコメントがぴんと来ました。ずっと前から伊丹監督さんの映画に興味を持って、大好きで大体全部を見たことあります。(以前日本で住んで、働きました。学生時代 昭和43-44年東京にも京都にも住んで、四年後また東京に戻って昭和48年から 53年まで、米JPモルガンの東京支店で営業部長として働きました。)主として山崎さんの三つも(つまりお葬式、たんぽぽ、マルサの女)一番好きで、かなり現代日本の文化の物語として抜群でした。

私は今、小説家として本だけを書きますが今年の四月には十番めの小説を出しました。私のウェブサイトで -- www.schlosstein.net -- 全ての詳細が有ります。その中の二冊は日本語版あり--「貿易戦争」『日本は悪くない』と言う題名で(1986)と「えんどオブあめりか」(1989)。

今のところで日本の映画にかんする短い記事を書き始めて、つまり「どうして日本の映画の質がここ十年来でやや落ちて来たか」という話題につい

て記事を書きたい。勿論中国も韓国もの映画が最近かなり盛んに成っていますが、日本では昔と同じような「本当の物語」が出来る日本人監督がいなくなります：黒沢さん、小津さん、成瀬さん、市川さん、伊丹監督さん等--
いわばマスターズ-今現在ではいません。それは一体なぜでしょうか。

今年の秋ごろまた来日する予定で、九月の**22、23、24**そして**28、29、30**東京にいるつもりです。もし山崎さんの都合がよければ、是非お会いしたいと思うのですが、この話題について話し合いたいと思います。忙しいでしょうと思いますが、九月の時に、最高一時間だけを貸して下さいたら大変助かります。私は全然有名ではないし、日本語少ししか分かりませんがもし「山さん」と会う事が出来ましたら、どんなに素晴らしいでしょう。もし差し支えなければ、もちろんインタビューを日本語でやらせていただきたいと思います。

東京での連絡先は六本木の国際文化会館です。電話 (03) 3470-4611、私の旧友足葉むねちくさんという総支配人が私のスケジュールを存じてるはずですが。もしアポイントが出来ましたら、日本語でも **e-mail**又は **fax**で私に知らせて下さい。不通の航空便でもけっこうです。

お宅の貴重な時間のほんの少しいただければ、大変きょうしくです。前もって、心から有難うございます。

9月に山崎さんと会う事を、たいへん楽しみしております。

敬具

シュロスタイン、ステイブ

「シュロス」と言うのは「城」でございます。
「スタイン」と言うのは「石」です。
日本語では「城石」と申します。独系の名前です。

以上です。