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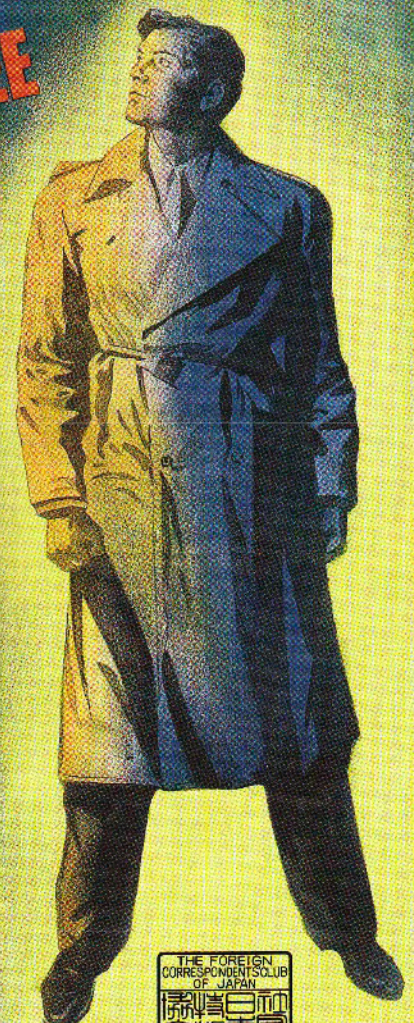
FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS'

presents the tale of the

CLUB'S MOVIE COMMITTEE

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▶ THE FCCJ IS HOME TO JAPAN'S ONLY ONGOING (FREE!) FILM SERIES WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES AND FILMMAKER Q&A SESSIONS

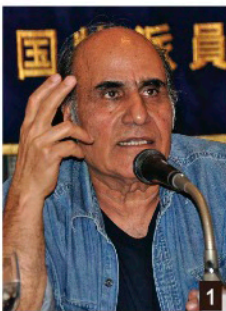
Screening movies that matter

by Karen Severns

On a mild September evening in 2009, the Club was crawling with journalists of every nationality, all anxious to view the first-ever Japan screening of *The Cove*, the controversial film about the town of Taiji and its now infamous dolphin hunt. The Movie Committee (MC) had anticipated the frenzy and set up three screens on two floors, with a guard at each DVD player.

At the post-screening Q&A, the film's star, Ric O'Barry, held aloft a package of dolphin meat purchased by Pio d'Emilio earlier that day in Taiji, and the crowd of 230—now spilling into the hallway—collectively craned its neck in disbelief. It was a stagey moment—and a heady success for the committee, which had spent over a year making arrangements to bring the film to the Club.

But it wasn't the first time the MC had hosted an SRO screening, and thankfully, it hasn't been the last. Over the past five years, we have averaged about 15 sneak previews and special screenings a year, with audiences averaging about 130 members and guests.



Although we have more intimate gatherings for issues-oriented documentaries, we've attracted huge crowds for films as diverse as Yang Li's contentious documentary *Yasukuni*, Tra Ahn Hung's *Norwegian Wood* (in part due to the presence of comely stars Rinko Kikuchi and Kiko Mizuhara), the late Koji Wakamatsu's *Caterpillar*, the Osamu Mukai vehicle *We Can't Change the World, but We Wanna Build a School in Cambodia*, Iranian maestro Amir Naderi's Tokyo-set *Cut*, and even *Underwater Love*, the world's first pink (soft-porn) musical.

We have sneak previewed Japan's two latest official Oscar selections, Kaneto Shindo's *Postcard* and Yonghi Yang's *Our Homeland*, and hosted animated Q&A sessions with a

range of international and Japanese talent, including screen legends Kyoko Kagawa, Joe Shishido, Chieko Matsubara, Kilin Kiki and Koji Yakusho.

In the same way that PAC aggressively targets and pursues the newsmakers, the MC's dedicated team of cinephiles—Edwin Karmiol, Karen Severns, Yukie Kito and Koichi Mori-



goes after the most noteworthy, newsworthy films and filmmakers, seeking depth, breadth and variety as we line up titles large and small, narrative and documentary, foreign and Japanese, by known and young, up-and-coming directors. Despite increasing competition from DVD/VOD and the constant struggle of booking space for screenings with ample lead time, we have consistently managed to arrange high-profile events.

Relying on a vast network of friends and contacts in the film industry, as well as Koichi's exceptional coordination and technical skills and the on-site support of FCCJ stalwarts Kanako Nakayama, Shinichi Nakajima and Takahiro Ayabe, we have made the Club a must-stop venue for sneak previews of new releases, particularly specialty and award-winning films (although we don't slight commercial releases if they are making news).

As the Japanese audience for foreign films (especially Hollywood's) contracted over the past five years, marketing budgets began to shrink, and fewer distributors could afford to bring Western filmmakers to Japan for promotion. Since it became more difficult to screen such films at the club, the committee began programming more Japanese and Asian films and timed screenings to coincide with their theatrical releases. This enabled us to reach out to the Japanese—along with the foreign—press and to greatly enhance

coverage of our unique, post-screening Q&A sessions.

This has proven to be a boon both for the Club—whose visibility has been significantly increased through generous coverage of film nights in Japanese print, broadcast and online media—as well as for distributors. Because our events provide a rare opportunity for filmmakers and stars in Japan to interact openly with the press, they result in great photos, video grabs and sound bites, and also act as a springboard to overseas sales and festival berths, since foreign correspondents and film critics often start the buzz after seeing the films here first.



The FCCJ's screenings have always been free by necessity, since charging would require us to pay steep exhibition fees and we would lose the chance to show films before they hit theaters. The film series is thus a most unique perk of club membership.

Also singular are the committee's Meet the Filmmaker cocktail parties. Initiated in 2010 to bring in some much-needed coin, they allow attendees to chat informally with other film aficionados and some very famous guests. Filmgoers are encouraged to join us in the

Main Bar for post-screening gatherings, and we are forever grateful that Mohammed Hanif's sense of humor (and professionalism) is still intact at such a late hour.



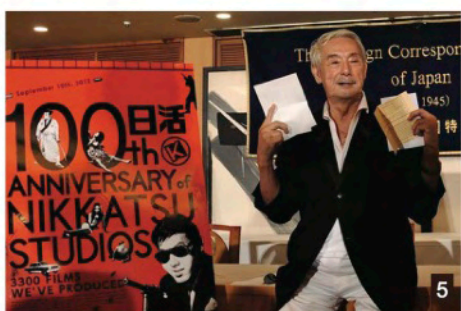
Despite being saddled with an outmoded name that tends to trivialize our position among the ranks of more impressive-sounding committees, the Movie Committee obviously takes its brief very seriously. In the past (see sidebar), screenings were arranged primarily to entertain Club audiences. But the role of film, and our understanding of it, has evolved.

Today we recognize that cinema is the world's single most powerful vehicle for the transmission of culture, education and entertainment

Karen Severns is a writer, filmmaker and educator who lectures widely on film and architecture. Edwin Karmiol joined the FCCJ in 1967 and the Movie Committee as soon as it adopted color films with sound.

single most powerful vehicle for the transmission of culture, education and entertainment (not to mention propaganda). The film industry has now converged across dozens of platforms, and its global economic impact is enormous. Ubiquity alone makes it a constantly vital news story, but film also opens the door to greater understanding and appreciation of an enormous range of topics, themes and historical moments — of particular assistance to correspondents who are new to Japan.

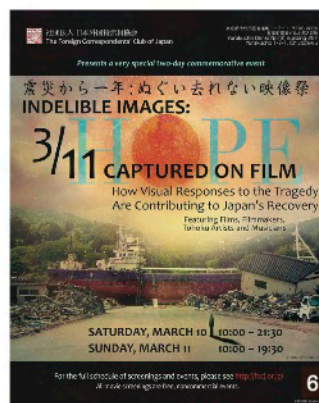
A dozen examples of this could be found during the FCCJ's groundbreaking tribute marking the first anniversary of the Tohoku catastrophe over the March 10 – 11, 2012 weekend. In



cooperation with the Food & Beverage Committee and supported by the US and German Embassies and the Japan Foundation, the Movie Committee presented 12 sneak previews of films related to 3/11, along with art, food and sake sales from Tohoku, and a Saturday evening charity concert.

The tribute, "Indelible Images: 3/11 Captured on Film," marked the FCCJ's first foray into events open to the public, and we were gratified by a turnout that topped 1,000. The weekend included the first screenings in Japan of Lucy Walker's stunning Oscar nominee *The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom*, and the eye-opening German documentary *Radioactivists: Protest and Discourse in Japan Since Fukushima*, and featured guests as diverse as antinuclear activist/filmmaker Hitomi Kamanaka, horror-meister Hideo Nakata, hitmaker Yukihiko Tsutsumi and the club's own Bruce Osborn.

We hope you'll continue to join us each month for our carefully curated selection of movies that matter. They're often as enlightening as they are enjoyable, always timely and frequently something to write home about.



1: Iranian filmmaker Amir Naderi answers questions about his Japan-set *Cut*; 2: former dolphin trainer Ric O'Barry hoists a package of dolphin meat following the screening of *The Cove*; 3: Kiko Mizuhara, Oscar nominee Rinko Kikuchi and Vietnamese-French director Tra Ahn Hung discuss *Norwegian Wood*; 4: 99-year-old director Kaneto Shindo gets some ear-assist from his granddaughter at the press luncheon for his final film, *Postcard*; 5: the irrepressible Joe Shishido brandishes his FCCJ Honorary Membership card following *A Colt Is My Passport*; 6: the poster for FCCJ's weekend-long tribute marking the 3/11/11 tragedies; 7: megastar Osamu Mukai poses for a packed house after the screening of *But We Wanna Build a School in Cambodia*; 8: film royalty Kilin Kiki and Koji Yakusho pull faces with director Masato Harada after the *Chronicle of My Mother* screening. Photos copyright Edwin Karmiol and Koichi Mori.



FADE IN ON . . .

On July 8, 1964, the FCCJ released a list of new committees. Among them, the general membership happily welcomed the birth of the Movie Committee, with Julius Zenier, a TV photographer, at the helm. According to some unreliable sources, the first projection was, naturally, Alfred Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent*.

But the real action started shortly after the Club moved to its current location in 1975, featuring a dining room spacious enough to accommodate a reasonable number of viewers for the Wednesday movie evenings. In those days of 35mm film projection, there were two scheduled screenings, regularly attended by a total of 300 spectators. All seats were numbered and had to be personally reserved at the reception desk, leading to panicked phone calls from members' friends and colleagues who were outside the club and wanted seats.

In the 1980s, the late Andy Adams, a fanatic cinephile and Movie Committee chair, started a weekly movie program for children. All went smoothly until one Saturday, when the bunnies dancing across the screen were briefly interrupted by a hard-core scene from a pornographic film. MC member Peter Hazelhurst arrived just in time to witness upset mothers, their hands covering their children's eyes, fleeing the make-shift cinema.

After that incident, Andy allegedly refused to accept further videotape donations.

Correspondents who missed their train home would often simply go down to the 18th floor, open on a 24/7 basis, select a tape or laserdisc from MC's growing collection (which eventually totaled some 3,000 titles), choose from three different viewing rooms, and watch films until the first train.

At its inception, the committee owed its success to the fact that we could view the latest Hollywood release or English-subtitled prints, which were a rarity in Japan. As time passed, we updated the media equipment from a rental 35mm projector to Beta, VHS and laserdisc players, and finally, to DVD and Blu-Ray players. The Club's collection of films has also been constantly pruned, and today only the DVDs remain. Although new titles have not been added since 2010 (except through member donations, which we highly encourage), we offer several thousand top-notch films in every genre—all searchable via an interactive database—for free rental. That's a price many FCCJ members find hard to resist.

— Edwin Karmiol