

# Tokyo 2005

By Ron Holloway

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## TOKYO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2005

Credit festival chairman Tsuguhiko Kadokawa with the remarkable revival of the Tokyo International Film Festival (TIFF). Three years ago, when the Kadokawa Group (the "Japanese Bertelsmann" in some literary circles) expanded its publications-and-media base to rejuvenate a then moribund national film event, Tsuguhiko Kadokawa, together with Yusuke Okada (executive committee chairman), pulled out all the stops to assure that TIFF would become a key international festival on both the world and Asian film scenes. "I like to think of the Tokyo International Film Festival as the mirror of the world cinema industry," Kadokawa stated in his address penned for the festival catalogue.

And, indeed, the 18<sup>th</sup> Tokyo International Film Festival (22-30 October 2005) was one for the books. A balanced slate of 15 art and entertainment films competed for the renamed Tokyo Sakura (Cherry Tree) Grand Prix, with its US\$100,000 purse going to the winner. Several world premieres were noted among the 350 films screened in 18 sections. Altogether, 586 films were submitted from 65 countries. The international jury, headed by ace Chinese director Zhang Yimou, also numbered two prominent Japanese personalities: actress Kaori Momoi and bestselling writer Koji Suzuki. Kaori Momoi can be seen as Empress Kojun in Alexander Sokurov's *The Sun* (Russian entry at this year's Berlinale) and as Okami in Rob Marshall's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (USA). As for Koji Suzuki, the "Stephen King of Japan," he has seen his psycho-thriller *Ring* successfully adapted to the screen in Japan, South Korea, and the United States.

An estimated 267,000 spectators cued over nine days at eleven venues in the hip Roppongi Hills and Shibuya Bunkamura districts. The figures are staggering when one considers that this year's festival highlighted Far East cinema as much as American mainstream movies and European art films. More than 100 Asian films were programmed at TIFF 2005, the best of the lot slated for the Competition and Special Screenings. However, discoveries surfaced as well in two sidebar sections: "Winds of Asia" (37 entries from Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, China, and Hong Kong) and "Japanese Eyes" (11 across-the-board genre entries). Both sections were anointed with separate juries. Taiwan, highlighted with a dozen entries in Winds of Asia, was boosted in turn by the Akira Kurosawa Award (plus a US\$100,000 purse) given on closing night to Taiwan master Hou Hsiao Hsien (*A City of Sadness*, Golden Lion, Venice 1989).

That's only half of the story. This year's festival expanded its horizons to include a first-time "TIFFCOM 2005" - an Entertainment Market that aims to promote an ongoing dialogue between culture and industry in the neighbouring Asian-Pacific countries as well as to lay the foundation for promoting abroad the wealth of Asian films, TV programs, animation, and video-and-computer games. As the reverse side of that coin, the festival launched "TIFF in Akihabara" - or the Tokyo Asian-Pacific Entertainment Festival, quartered in the all-purpose Akihabara venue. In other words, the full scope of Japanese media entertainment was open to the general public for live performances and events from the Tokyo arts scene.

TIFF 2005 opened with the world premiere of Zhang Yimou's *Qian li zou dan ji* (*Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles*), a Japanese-Chinese coproduction starring Japanese icon actor Ken Takakura. A bittersweet father-son tale about a father trying to repair a torn relationship, *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* draws its title from an ancient Chinese folk-opera that had fascinated the photographer son before he was suddenly struck down with a terminal illness. The closing scene was shot in a Chinese prison with real prisoners re-enacting the folk-opera. At the festival screening Zhang Yimou recounted how, back in 1978, he had seen Ken Takakura in *Kimi yo fundo no kawa wo watare* (*Cross the Raging River*), the first Japanese film released in China after the Cultural Revolution and a box office hit seen by millions. Asked about his future plans, Zhang also confirmed that he is scheduled to stage his own version of a famous Chinese folk-opera, *The First Emperor*, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York next autumn. Again, it will be a Chinese-Japanese coproduction, staged together with set designer Wada Emi.

For the first time in festival history a Japanese entry, Kichitaro Negishi's *Yuki ni negaikoto* (*What the Snow Brings*), was awarded the Tokyo Sakura Grand Prix, coupled by additional awards for Best Director and Best Actor (Koichi Sato as the older brother). Set in winter on the island of Hokkaido, where a popular sport is the Obihiro horse race featuring muscular draft-horses pulling loaded sleighs over steep slopes to a finish line, *What the Snow Brings* depicts the healing of a fragile relationship between two brothers. "In my film I tried to focus on family relations, a traditional theme of Japanese movies," said Kichitaro Negishi at the awards ceremony. And upon being doubly awarded with the Best Director prize, he added on a note of modesty: "I would like to dedicate this film to Japanese film directors who have developed our film industry."

Both Chinese entries in the Competition were awarded. In Wang Yazhou's *Loach Is Fish Too*, awarded Best Artistic Contribution, the lot of migrant workers from the countryside, who currently are streaming into Beijing to find work on construction sites as the city prepares for the coming Olympic Games, is depicted in stark uncompromising detail. Two of these manipulated workers bear by coincidence the same name: the divorced woman Loach (Ni Ping) literally lugs her infant daughters around with her, while the man Loach (Ni Dahong) fumbles for a show of affection from his namesake while wrestling with his fate as a doomed and exploited work-foreman. "There are so many migrant workers in China, but no film has ever portrayed them," said Wang Yazhou in an interview. "So I felt it my responsibility to do so. Besides, there are not enough films in China that depict ordinary country people."

In Ma Liwen's *You and Me*, Jin Yaqin, an 84-year-old stage actress making her first screen appearance, was awarded Best Actress. Jin Yaqin plays a lonely, embittered landlady with a hand for squeezing all she can out of a young girl student (Gong Zhe) at the nearby Beijing Film School by renting her a conveniently located but completely rundown shack in her courtyard. Only when the girl asks the old lady for permission to interview her for a film project is the ice broken, as her past gradually emerges from the shadows. Shot over four seasons by a talented cameraman (Wu Di), *You and Me* comes across as a poignant fiction documentary.

Awarded the Special Jury Prize, plus a share of the Best Actress award for Helena Bonham Carter, Hans Canosa's *Conversations with Other Women* (USA) arrived at TIFF shortly after winning accolades of critical praise at the Telluride Film Festival. Anchored to a thought-provoking, give-and-take *Kammerspiel* script (Gabrielle Zevin), and neatly imbedded in a split-screen format (camera Steve Yedlin), the "conversations" between the couple in their late thirties during and after a wedding reception amount to little more than an adroit game of one-upmanship, witty and sad at the same time. For it turns out that the pair, played by Aaron Eckhart and Helena Bonham Carter, were once a campus twosome. Now, however, he's an on-the-make lothario with a young fiancée on the line, while she's a cynical chain-smoking wife and mother with a family back in London. Although the roll in bed seems inevitable from the start, it's how they get in and out of each other's arms that amuses. Hans Canosa is adept at sleight-of-hand directorial and editing tricks.

The discovery in the competition? Tatsushi Omori's *Gerumaniumu no yoru* (*The Whispering of the Gods*, Japan), a feature film debut, is destined to make the rounds of international festivals on thematic material alone. Based on a provocative, scandalous, award-winning novel, *Germanium Nights* by Mangetsu Hanamura, the setting is a Catholic youth institution modelled along Don Bosco or Boys Town lines - only in *The Whispering of the Gods* the priest in charge is a paedophile who has the youths in his care masturbate him while reciting from the Gospels in Latin. Visually, Tatsushi Omori and his cameraman Ryo Otsuka have crafted an intriguing, often gripping minimalist treatise on sex and violence, reminiscent of anticlerical reckonings against church and society by Luís Buñuel and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Anticipating some damning protests from authorities when the film premieres in Japan in mid-December, producer Genjiro Arato has built his own 200-seat venue in downtown Tokyo for the film's exclusive theatrical run. Thus, for the next six months or more, this is the only place in Japan where *The Whispering of the Gods* can be seen.

## References

### AWARDS

#### Competition

#### Tokyo Sakura Grand Prix

*Yuki ni negaikoto* (*What the Snow Brings*, Japan)  
dir Kichitaro Negishi

**Special Jury Prize**

*Conversations with Other Women* (USA)  
dir Hans Canosa

**Best Actress** (ex aequo)

Jin Yaqin, *You and Me* (China)  
dir Ma Liwen  
Helena Bonham Carter, *Conversations with Other Women* (USA)  
dir Hans Canosa

**Best Actor**

Koichi Sato, *Yuki ni negaikoto* (*What the Snow Brings*, Japan)  
dir Kichitaro Negishi

**Best Artistic Contribution**

*Loach Is Fish Too* (China)  
dir Yang Yazhou

**Other Awards**

**Akira Kurosawa Award**  
Hou Hsiao Hsien, Taiwan

**Best Asian Film - "Winds of Asia" Section**

*Sepet* (*Slit Eyes*, Malaysia)  
dir Yasmin Ahmad

**Special Mention**

*Be With Me* (Singapore)  
dir Eric Khoo

**Best Japanese Film - "Japanese Eyes" Section**

*Camus nante shiranai?* (*Who's Camus Anyway?*)  
dir Mitsuo Yanagimachi

**Special Award**

*Ski Jump Pair - Road to Torino 2006*  
dir Masaki Kobayashi

**Best Director**

Kichitaro Negishi, *Yuki ni negaikoto* (*What the Snow Brings*, Japan)

**Author Information**

Ron HOLLOWAY (1933-2009) was an American critic, film historian, filmmaker and correspondent who adopted Europe as his home in the early fifties and spent much of his life in Berlin. He was an expert on the study of German cinema and against all odds produced, with his wife Dorothea, the journal *German Film*, keeping us up-to-date with the work of directors, producers and writers and the showing of German films around the world.

In 2007, Ron Holloway and his wife were awarded the Berlinale Camera Award. Ron also received the Bundesverdienstkreuz (German Cross of Merit), Polish Rings, Cannes Gold Medaille, the American Cinema Foundation Award, the Diploma for Support of Russian Cinema and an honorary award from the German Film Critics' Association.

Ron was also a valued contributor to *Kinema* for the past fifteen years.