

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 96):

The Japanese Film Festival

29 November 2022

Last week, the annual Japanese Film Festival completed its run in Canberra. In 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, screenings were cancelled across multiple locations, hence the festival was held jointly online and in person. In 2022, at long last, it became possible to hold not only in-person screenings, but a lively Opening Night Reception. It certainly is a treat to see films on the big screen!



The promotional poster for the 2022 Japanese Film Festival, featuring characters from the film *Dreaming of the Meridian Arc*

1. A long history

The Japanese Film Festival has a long history in Australia. The first festival took place in 1997 and has been held every year since, with 2022 marking the 26th year. Last year, for the 25th Japanese Film Festival, films were screened both in cinemas and online, and over 70,000 people are said to have participated.

This year's festival kicked off in Canberra and is now making its way across Australia to Perth, Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney. A total of 14 films are on offer. This large-scale event would not be possible without the tireless efforts of the Director of the Japan Foundation Sydney office, Mr SHONO Keiji, and his team.

2. A friendly rivalry

In Canberra, there is a culture of endless film screenings run by embassies and cultural organisations representing many different countries. I have myself, between hosting receptions and embarking on business trips, managed to slip away to enjoy film screenings from Norway, the United Kingdom, Mexico, South Korea and many others, and hence witnessed this diplomatic version of the 'hard sell'.

Of these, there was one screening in particular that made me think 'of course!'. This was the one hosted by my friend, UK High Commissioner HE Vicki Treadell, and the chosen film was none other than the latest James Bond movie. What is more, the dress code was given as follows: 'black tie, or dressed as a Bond villain'. The UK sure does put its soft power to good use!



At the UK High Commission's screening of the latest James Bond film (also referenced in [News From Under the Southern Cross, Edition 47](#)).

3. The power of film

In my student years, when I frequented cinemas in both Shibuya and New York's Greenwich Village, film was much more than a medium for entertainment. Going to the movies was not only a chance to expose myself to living, breathing English, but also an opportunity to build a deeper understanding of people and the society they live in.

Speaking of my time in the United States, I remember that I learned the most and was greatly motivated by imbibing classics such as *Casablanca*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Godfather*, *The Great Gatsby* and *Sophie's Choice*.

Japanese films are no different. They are a great tool to deepen understanding and empathy for the lifestyle and customs of Japanese people, as well as their history and ways of thinking. By extension, film festivals are an important means of cultivating a better understanding of this 'real' Japan.

4. The Opening Night Reception

The work chosen to be this year's Opening Night film was *Dreaming of the Meridian Arc*, starring famous Japanese actors HASHIZUME Isao, NAKAI Kiichi and KITAGAWA Keiko.



A modern-day scene with HASHIZUME Isao, NAKAI Kiichi and MATSUYAMA Kenichi, from the film *Dreaming of the Meridian Arc*.

Centred on the life of INO Tadataka – who became the first person to map the Japanese continent in the late Edo period – this is a tasteful work which interweaves past and present events as the plot unfolds. The witty banter between NAKAI's character and that of MATSUYAMA Kenichi drew many laughs from the Aussies who packed the cinema. I believe quite a few of us there were also taken in by the beautiful coastline of Sotobo in Chiba Prefecture, where the film is set.

In the late Edo period, INO Tadataka set out to create a map of the Japanese archipelago as a measure against the threat of Western powers, yet his vision was left unfulfilled by his untimely death. His pupils then took up this final wish and completed the project in 1821, three years after his death. Upon seeing the words 'unsung heroes' appear in the English subtitles, I couldn't help but think it was a perfect translation.

(My speech at the Opening Night Reception is available [here](#))

5. The power of ordinary people

For many years, I have travelled overseas frequently, and this has led me to wonder what Japan's greatest asset is when compared with other countries. Many years ago, a South Korean diplomat who studied at Tokyo University professed to me that, "what is impressive about Japan isn't their politicians or diplomats, but the ordinary people". While I came away from that conversation feeling somewhat perplexed, I gained a newfound recognition for the kind of observations a non-Japanese person might make about Japan.

In the same vein, the true protagonist of *Dreaming of the Meridian Arc* is not INO Tadataka himself, but his disciples who finished the project he had so painstakingly worked on. Without a doubt, these are the 'ordinary people' who so often remain nameless. These disciples had the devotion and determination to work tirelessly to finish their task, to pursue perfection with minute attention to detail, and to form strong bonds with their colleagues, helping each other out when needed. This was a film which spared no detail in depicting Japanese people and society.



A scene from *Dreaming of the Meridian Arc* in which INO's disciples work to map the beautiful coastline.

6. Surviving the Great East Japan Earthquake

That weekend, I accompanied some of my Aussie friends to see another film at the festival — *In the Wake* — on the invitation of the Australia-Japan Society of the ACT.

The protagonists of *In the Wake* lost their families in the tsunami following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, and still live with the deep wounds of their grief. The film skilfully tells the stories of an arsonist, a murderer and a detective who, although they come from different walks of life, all bear the scars of the 3.11 disaster. It is a truly heart-wrenching story.

Whether Japanese or Australian, and whether familiar with the disaster-affected region or not, this was an excellent film that really pulled at the heartstrings. I recommend you keep a handkerchief on hand.



SATO Takeru's character (middle) in *In the Wake* is the prime suspect in a murder case.



The detective, played by ABE Hiroshi (right).

This film too depicted the suffering as well as the heart-warming kindness of the 'ordinary people' of the Tohoku region when faced with unspeakable adversity.

7. The outstanding appeal of Japanese films

My pen might have run away with me a little as I poured my emotions out onto the page, but I hope I have convinced you of the appeal of Japanese films both as tools for understanding Japan and as exceptional cinematic works.

Speaking of which, I have been told by a number of my fellow Ambassadors that the recent film *Drive My Car* directed by HAMAGUCHI Ryusuke is "simply amazing". I remember how happy I felt knowing not only that we share a love of this film, but also that *Drive My Car* adequately conveyed the sensibility of the Japanese.



The Japanese Film Festival Opening Night Reception in Canberra.
Top: with Mr SHONO, Director of the Japan Foundation's Sydney office.

Unlike the speeches of a diplomat, which are preoccupied with being balanced and not getting caught off guard, the best films combine high-quality performances from top actors with powerful music and sound effects to deliver next-level impact and intensity. The Japanese Film Festival was very well-received in Canberra, and I expect it will garner well-deserved attention in other parts of Australia, too. It is my hope that even more people will be enchanted by these excellent films and decide to see Japan for themselves.

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