

Jeremy Thomas: Working with Japanese Film Directors

Tuesday 25th May 2021, 12.00–13.00 BST

Shōzō: First, I'd like to start with a question about *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence*, by Nagisa Ōshima, because it was the first time you worked with a Japanese filmmaker. How did this project come about?

Jeremy: Life, I've discovered, is a bit like a river with all its confluences. On my river, I just so happened to sit next to Nagisa Ōshima at a prizegiving ceremony at Cannes Film Festival, and we exchanged business cards and got a bit drunk. Then about two years later, I received the screenplay through Michiyo Yoshizaki in London. It was very long, about 185 pages. By coincidence, I was going to Japan for my first trip with Nicholas Roeg's *Bad Timing*. So I went to Tokyo and met with Ōshima-san, and we decided to make this film. He agreed that we could rewrite the screenplay with Paul Mayersberg and that was the beginning of it all; it was just pure chance. I also knew a lot about Japanese cinema by then, and I had a love and passion for Japanese cinema.

Shōzō: You worked on the casting of the European actors, as well as the financing, but I assume you were also deeply involved with the creative aspects of the film. Were you involved in the scriptwriting stages of the film? And if so, did you face any difficulties regarding the cultural gap between Japan and the West?

Jeremy: This was the wonderful thing because Ōshima understood that he needed a Western point of view on it, and he was very happy to have the great writer Paul Mayersberg, and later the collaborators that I introduced to him and the help and encouragement I gave him in the development of the script and the casting. And with casting David Bowie and Tom Conti and Jack Thompson in the film, he said to me, 'You cast the Western parts because you understand what they symbolise', which was very helpful. Of course, he wanted David Bowie, and Bowie already knew the films of Ōshima very well – he was a very sophisticated person – and the first time I met Bowie he said, 'Well I'm in, I want to work with Ōshima and I want to play Celliers.'

The film is based on Sir Laurens van der Post's true experiences and the books are very loved. It was so fascinating to have a different point of view on a prisoner of war camp, which was really a cliché in the way of *Bridge Over the River Kwai*. So I thought this approach was going to be something that everybody would be very interested in. It was an amazing experience and you can see how many people were there. We shot on an island in the Pacific, Rarotonga, because then we could get funding from the New Zealand government.

Shōzō: So the film was shot in New Zealand but did the main crew come from Japan? Or was the crew a mixed Japanese and European crew?

Jeremy: Yes, there was a mixture of crew coming from the UK, and the art director and various other crew members came from New Zealand.

Shōzō: Did you encounter any problems between the Japanese and European crew?

Jeremy: No, everybody was on their best behaviour, naturally, and became very friendly. Ōshima was very tough with the Japanese crew but he was very kind to the Western crew. It was quite funny seeing him turn to the Japanese crew and speak to them in a very strict way, and then turn to the British crew and speak to them very softly. The DoP was a very interesting character who had seen active service in the Second World War. He really knew how to use a sword, and when it wasn't being used correctly, for example in the hara-kiri scene, he would come in and show the actors exactly the way to do it. It was a fantastic experience.

Shōzō: The two main Japanese actors were Takeshi Kitano and Ryūichi Sakamoto. I understand it was Sakamoto's first time acting, while Kitano was widely known as a comedian with very little dramatic experience. I remember thinking at the time that casting these non-professionals for the two main roles was a very brave decision. What was the background to this casting? Were Sakamoto and Kitano Ōshima's first choices or were there any other options?

Jeremy: When I arrived and started talking to Ōshima about the project, he already had these characters set in his mind. He wanted Ryūichi of course to do the music but Ryūichi was slightly resistant at the beginning. And then Ōshima had always wanted Kitano because of his face, which he thought was so perfect. I think in their scenes with Tom Conti, the actors worked off each other and helped each other to be good. Tom Conti was a fine actor, but he didn't speak Japanese. He had to learn it phonetically and it was very interesting seeing that work!

Shōzō: After *Mr Lawrence* you produced *The Last Emperor*, also with Ryūichi Sakamoto as a supporting actor and composer (he won the Oscar for the latter). What was your collaboration with [Bernardo] Bertolucci and Sakamoto like?

Jeremy: Ryūichi is a wonderful, professional person. He gave so much in *Merry Christmas*, *Mr Lawrence*. I understood that he had something very special and I suggested to Bernardo that he play Amakasu in *The Last Emperor*. While we were working in Manchuria, we needed a piece of music for the second coronation ball and he said to Ryūichi, go and record a piece of music. So Ryūichi went to the local studio where the recording equipment was ancient and recorded this incredible piece of music, and Bernardo said after that 'I want you to do the score'. But it was my plan always to get Ryūichi to do the score because he's such a wonderful composer, and it's unusual to find a composer like that, who's so collaborative. Then Bernardo chose to continue working with him on his future films.

Shōzō: After *Merry Christmas*, *Mr Lawrence*, Takeshi Kitano became more involved in filmmaking, and in 1989 he released his directorial debut, *Violent Cop*, for which

I was one of the producers. Later, he directed *Hana-bi* [Fireworks], which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1997. *Brother*, which both of us helped produce, was Takeshi Kitano's eighth feature film as a director. It was the first film he shot outside Japan, with most of the scenes shot in California. What was your impression of Kitano as a director and how did this project come about?

Jeremy: Well, when you make a movie on a desert island you become friendly with all the people you work with! I started a sort of semi-friendship with Kitano, and when I was in Tokyo, we used to have dinner together. Then at one point he said, 'You know, I'm thinking of making a film in America in English', and I said, 'I'm there, I'm going to do that with you!' So with you and [Masayuki] Mori-san, we started building the production. I took care of the American section and then all of us put it together financially. We took the film to Cannes and it was very enjoyable, the whole making of it. Having Kitano in America, in downtown LA, and shooting that film there with Omar Epps, it was a new experience of working on another kind of film, that was still Japanese cinema.

Shōzō: As a film producer, I know there's a big difference between shooting in the US and shooting in Japan. When Japanese filmmakers shoot a film in the US, they usually face many difficulties when it comes to the way we produce. For example there was regulation by unions, both actors and crew, that the film was to be made under a completion bond. How did you deal with these difficulties? Was it easy for you to shoot this film?

Jeremy: I had very good collaborators who had a good understanding of everything. The film was made in, what for me was the 'traditional' way in America, but you just have to take care of all those complications. Then when we work in Japan of course you have to do it the Japanese way, and where many make mistakes in coming to Japan to make films, is that they don't respect the incredible abilities of Japanese filmmakers to make films just as well as anywhere in the world. It's very important not to try and force a methodology on the filmmaking you've conceived, you need to go with the way of the place you're working in. I've done that all over the world and that's the way I like to work. It's more interesting, working like that.

Shōzō: The budget for *Brother* was about \$8 million, with half provided by Kitano and other Japanese investors, and half provided by you. How did you sell the film to Europe and the US?

Jeremy: It was a long time ago and the film business has changed so much. I covered it, if you can believe that! When we signed our agreement in Tokyo, I went back to London and I found the money within a week with two phone calls. I phoned my friends at Sony in America and told them about the film, sent them the script, and in France I did the same with my colleague and my partner there. But today, it would be impossible for me to achieve that because there are very few

directors in the world that you could do that with – except for maybe Bong Joon-ho.

Shōzō: Now let's move onto the film *13 Assassins* directed by Takashi Miike, released in 2010. This film is a tribute to the legendary Japanese epic films of the 1970s and was your first collaboration with Takashi Miike and producer Toshiaki Nakazawa, president of Sedic International. Unlike *Merry Christmas*, *Mr Lawrence* and *Brother*, *13 Assassins* does not have any Western elements. How did your collaboration come about? What were your main reasons for deciding to produce the film? Were you interested in Miike's talents or more interested in the subject matter?

Jeremy: I really like Miike's films and I was looking to work with him before *13 Assassins*. I had a [Junichirō] Tanizaki book that I had a screenplay of, *The Secret History of the Lord Musashi*. It's an incredible book, but unfilmable, like a lot of the books I try to adapt! My good friend and colleague Tetsu Fujimura arranged a meeting with Miike for me at the Venice Film Festival, and we had a nice meal together. I gave him the screenplay, but I got a response from him say, 'Well, I don't know that I can do this screenplay, but I would love to work with you together with Nakazawa-san and Sedic.' And that led to a long collaboration with him, with Nakazawa and with other producers in Japan. I think we had a different point of view on the film. We presented it in a slightly different way and brought the film to quite a big audience in the rest of the world.

Shōzō: The film was selected to compete at the Venice Film Festival, and it was quite successful worldwide. What do you think was the reason for this international success? Which aspects of the film were welcomed by Western audiences?

Jeremy: Well I think it's very pure, it's a very pure subject and it gave a very full-on depiction of Japanese samurai culture – it really echoes Kurosawa's great samurai films. Plus, I really appreciated Miike-san's shooting style. I've worked with great stylist filmmakers in the past. As a producer, I'm looking for somebody with style, with impact, so directors like Ōshima, Kitano, Miike, [David] Cronenberg etc. fit that bill. *13 Assassins* has such a superb Japanese style to it, wonderful costumes and wonderful sets. It was very well produced by Sedic in their studio in Yamagata prefecture where they have a valley with rivers and forests.

Shōzō: In Japan, there aren't many producers who are willing to work with foreign filmmakers – I'm one of the rare cases to the contrary! You have produced films in so many different countries. Did you always intend to work with foreign filmmakers rather than British ones?

Jeremy: It just happened, it wasn't a set plan. I travelled a lot as a boy with my father, who was a film director. I feel very English, but in the sense that I'm an English traveller. I love to travel the world and take on other cultures. Also, cinema is

very competitive in the UK and it's not the area I've been interested in. I tend to follow what I'm interested in rather than following a marketplace. I thought, well I'm just going to make films that really attract me, culturally and story-wise. I found it stimulating and I don't mind working in other languages (I speak a couple of languages badly). But I don't speak Japanese or Chinese, which I should do by now, but I don't feel any loss, I can find a way through that. I love being in Asia, and in Japan, and when people feel that you like being there, you enjoy the whole filmmaking experience. I've had a fantastic welcome from everybody every time.

Q&A

Guest: You're never afraid to tackle controversial subjects. Why is this?

Jeremy: I like controversial subjects because I'm in independent film, and I don't have lots of money to spend on marketing! I like a film that will help market itself, so controversy is always good. In the case of *Merry Christmas*, *Mr Lawrence*, it was a gay love story really, which was smuggled into a prisoner of war story. That's the core of the film, and that's what was interesting for Ōshima. I do like looking for films that are, as I said before, unfilmable books. For *Naked Lunch*, *Crash* and even *The Sheltering Sky*, it was fascinating trying to find a way into those books that thrill you.

Guest: It seems as if there are two different ways to look at the world, a Japanese way and a Western way, and the two are almost immiscible. How do you approach that?

Jeremy: Don't take the American approach, that's for sure! With *Black Rain* and *47 Ronin* for example, all the big companies that go to Japan and try to shoot films, they all have a big problem because they try and use the American methodology of shooting and production in a place where it shouldn't happen. It's really about having a respect and an intelligence for how to do it, and to use the difference in culture as a positive. American films shot in Japan are principally films that want to dominate the culture and interpret it in a Western way. But with *Merry Christmas*, *Mr Lawrence* or *Brother*, I wanted to try and get a full Japanese point of view over as well.

Guest: Do you think a new generation of filmmakers with unique voices will emerge again, given the changing cinematic landscape? Is it more difficult for original voices to emerge in the current environment?

Jeremy: I think it's easier for voices to emerge in this environment because everyone has the equipment: an iPhone 12. In the past you needed a lot of cash, but now somebody with an idea, with commitment and some skill and poetry, can make something. You can put a film out there on YouTube and other platforms which never existed before. So I think it's much better now.

Guest: How do you decide on the style that complements the storytelling?

Jeremy: Simply put, I'm a cinema lover and I know a lot about movies, I've loved them all my life. So when I get a screenplay, I know normally who the artist is, even if they've just made commercials or other things, like with Jonathan Glazer who did *Sexy Beast*. An expert in an auction house can recognise an unsigned painting, and similarly I can look at a film and tell who the director is from their signature style. That takes some understanding.