

NEW BEAT OF JAPAN

This has been quite a year for Japan. An economy spiraling downward, a prime minister hounded out of office, and the lingering trauma of the Tokyo subway gas attacks have all contributed to a sense of quiet desperation. And yet this adversity seems to have inspired an impressive and completely unexpected renaissance in the Japanese cinema.

Two years ago, when we first decided that Japan would be our choice for the national cinema programme, the country had been producing little more than a handful of interesting films every year. The last notable "movement" of Japanese cinema – the films of, especially, Sogo Ishii, Kaizo Hayashi, Naoto Yamakawa and Shinji Sohma in the eighties – had fizzled out, its promise never really fulfilled. And the pattern of production set in that decade continued: isolated auteurs struggled to make a first film, without any institutions to help them nor interest in their success from the traditional big studios.

But several subtle changes in the production machinery transformed the film world. First, the power of television money finally began to be felt; its hungry need for product helped break open the financing game. It was through this window that Naomi Kawase's *Suzaku*, the 1996 Camera d'Or winner at the Cannes film festival, was produced by the companies WOWOW and Bitters End. The medium also allowed certain personalities – most importantly Takeshi Kitano and Shinji Iwai – to use their television celebrity status to make independent films.

Another small but important step saw the Pia Film Festival begin an independent fund to finance their prize-winning filmmakers. This program created two of the most interesting of the New Beat filmmakers, Ryosuke Hashiguchi (*Like Grains Of Sand*) and Shinobu Yaguchi (*Down the Drain*). It also signaled a certain collegiality – as opposed to the mavericks of the eighties – in this new generation. Many of the filmmakers in this series will appear as actors or act as producers in films made by others; and many of the filmmakers are close friends.

All of these changes created a climate for stronger domestic production, but I doubt whether it all could have happened so fast if Japanese film had not returned so forcefully to the world stage. Following Kawase's Camera d'Or win in 1996 was Shoel Imamura's Palme d'Or in 1997 and Takeshi Kitano's Venice Golden Lion for *Fireworks*. Commercially, Miramax's release of *Shall We Dance?* was the most successful Japanese film in the USA for decades; the recent simultaneous release of *Fireworks* by Milestone and *Sonatine* by Miramax's Rolling Thunder label also generated huge interest in Japanese film.

I must also mention here the extraordinary work done by James Quandt of Cinematheque Ontario, and his colleagues in other organizations, who have tirelessly promoted Japanese cinema and have been instrumental in discovering many of the directors featured in this programme. Their work has given a context for and understanding of these films that all the prizes and splashy distribution ads may have temporarily shaded.

In this extremely diverse collection, the most striking shared concern for these filmmakers is an obsessive interest in the past. For Hirozaku Kore Eda and Koji Hagijuda this becomes a highly aestheticized quest for lost memory; in comedies like Gen Yamakawa's *Ping Pong Bath Station* and Koki Mitani's *Welcome Back Mr. McDonald*, nostalgia tinged with a hint of bitterness.

The problems facing Japan now are played out strongly in Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *The Cure* and Testuya Nakashima's *Beautiful Sunday*. They both use metaphors – the first an irresistible serial killer, the second an apartment building full of lonely souls – to address a gnawing sense of spiritual emptiness. This desperation is made visceral in Shinya Tsukamoto's *Bullet Ballet*, Saito's *Sunday Drive* and Sabu's *Unlucky Monkey*, as frustrated individuals seek a violent way out of society's depressing traps.

A fascination with genre also connects these films. Many of the filmmakers, especially Sabu and Tsukamoto, have cited the films of Kinji Fukusaku as major influences on them. His daring transformation of the yakuza film in the early seventies (*Battles Without Honor and Humanity*) connects his vision closely to this new generation of genre experiments. As such, the only "old" film presented as part of this programme is his seminal *Battles*.

Also of note is an intelligent and challenging appropriation of ideas from the history of Japanese cinema. Films like Kiyoshi Kumakiri's *Kichiku* and Katsuhito Ishii's *Shark Skin Man and Peach Hip Girl* look longingly at two campy classics, respectively Wakamatsu's *Ecstasy of Angels* and Fukusaku's earlier *Black Lizard*, and yet do so without a hint of po-mo irony.

Because of space limitations, not every film that influenced this movement has been included but, still, New Beat of Japan is a fairly accurate picture of the depth and breadth of work being produced in this most extraordinary country.

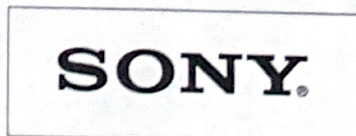
– Noah Cowan

Many people and institutions have been instrumental in the creation and execution of this programme. Kiyo Joo, Hiromi Aihara, Jacinta Hin, Linda Hoaglund, James Quandt and Toshiko Aidlman have been especially helpful. I also need to single out the extraordinary support and generosity of longtime friends of this Festival, Fran and Kaz Kuzui. From the Japan Foundation, Koto Sato especially, Marie Suzuki and Akiko Machimura have worked tirelessly for this programme. From the companies involved in this programme, I would like to thank Makoto Kakurai and Shozo Ichiyama (Shochiku), Wouter Barendrecht and Helen Loveridge (Fortissimo), Yumiko Takahashi (Dalei), Haruyo Moriyoshi (Tokuma), Takenori Sento and Yuki Sadai (Bitters End), Shiho Sato (TV Man Union), Keiko Araki (Pia Film Festival), Masayuki Mori (Office Kitano), Hengameh Panahi (Celluloid Dreams) and Kayo Yoshida (Asmik Ace Entertainment).

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After Life

Hirokazu Kore-Eda

JAPAN, 1998

118 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
Production Company: TV Man Union Inc./
Engine Film Inc.

Executive Producer: Yutaka Shigenobu

Producer: Shihō Sato, Masayuki Akiyeda

Screenplay: Hirokazu Kore-Eda

Cinematographer: Yutaka Yamazaki,

Masayoshi Sukita

Editor: Hirokazu Kore-Eda

Production Designer: Toshihiro Isomi,

Hideo Gunji

Sound: Osamu Takizawa

Music: Yashurō Kasamatsu

Principal Cast: Erika Oda, Susumu

Terajima, Sadawo Abe, Natsuo Ishido,

Kazuko Shirakawa

Print Source/Foreign Sales Agent:

Celluloid Dreams, 24 rue Lamartine,

75009 Paris, France. T (33-1) 4970-0370

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Production: TV Man Union Inc.,

30-13 Motoyoyogi-cho Shibuya-ku,

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Surely one of the most auspicious debuts in recent memory, *Maboroshi* still resonates as a powerful paean to the power of unexplained loss and the grief that follows in the wake of suicide. But even more extraordinary was the delicate and profound treatment of the film's guiding idea: the awesome potency of memory, a force equally capable of destruction and redemption.

This same fundamental theme underpins Hirokazu Kore-Eda's second feature, *After Life*, even though the context and scope of this new film is utterly different. Here he uses the idea of memory to craft an epic portrait of post-war Japanese society and to debate the true nature of happiness, all set in a kind of limbo, between life and death. The result is overwhelming, a quiet storm of a film that shakes our understanding of life to its very core.

Kore-Eda's Purgatory resembles a mist-enshrouded rural retreat. The dead register upon entry and are urged to sift through their memories in order to find one ultimate moment of joy. They have one week to do so. Quickly separated into one-on-one sessions with uniformed employees assigned to them, the dead begin discussing their lives, some with urgency, some with confusion. Each night, the staff gathers to discuss their cases, especially those "clients" in danger of never recovering a truly joyous memory.

Kore-Eda's background as a documentary filmmaker shines through in these sequences; the juggling of many different

life stories, including the enigmatic histories of the staff interviewers, is handled with confident cross-cutting and a marvelously naturalistic style.

Ultimately, when the interviews are over, the chosen moments – a first date, the smell of flowers, a last cigarette – are painstakingly recreated and filmed, creating the very personal heaven that each of the deceased will enter for all eternity.

Not only is this a beautiful, spiritually rich idea, but it is handled in a poignant cinematic fashion. The artificiality of the sets and players is foregrounded, as the scenes are constructed before the deceased's very eyes; yet they become almost giddy with joy as they see the proceedings unfold.

So, ultimately, Kore-Eda completes the circle: cinema too is a form of memory, with strong powers of redemption and transcendence. Perhaps *After Life* itself is his offering of proof.

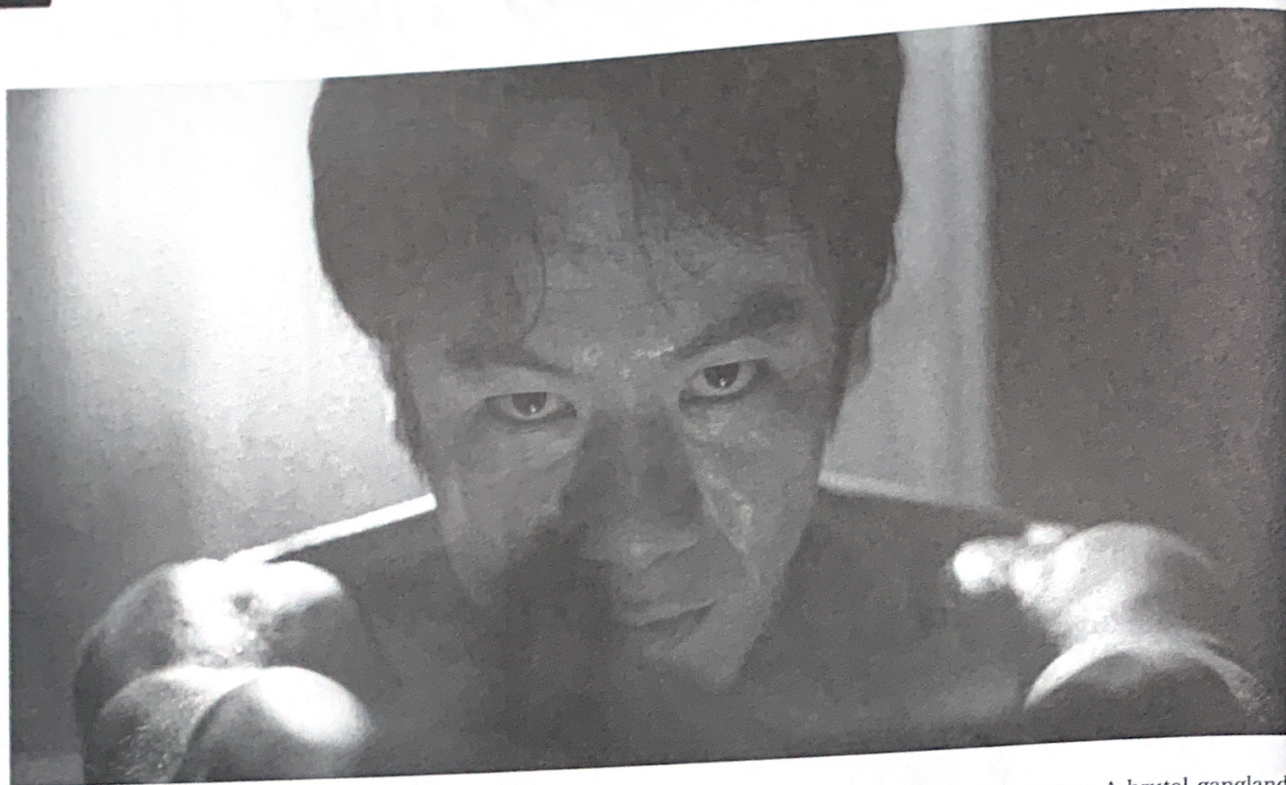
– Noah Cowan

Hirokazu Kore-Eda was born in 1962 in Tokyo, Japan. After graduating from Waseda University with a degree in creative writing, he started making television documentaries with TV Man Union. His narrative feature debut, *Maboroshi* (95), won him international acclaim. *After Life* (98) is his second feature.

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AIR CANADA



Bullet Ballet

Shinya Tsukamoto

JAPAN, 1998

90 minutes ■ Black and White/35mm
Production Company: **Kaijyu Theater Co., Ltd.**

Screenplay: **Shinya Tsukamoto**

Cinematographer: **Shinya Tsukamoto**

Editor: **Shinya Tsukamoto**

Music: **Chu Ishikawa**

Principal Cast: **Shinya Tsukamoto, Kirina**

Mano, Tatsuya Nakamura, Takahiro

Murase, Kyoka Suzuki, Hisashi Igawa

Print Source/Foreign Sales Agent:

Gold View Co. Ltd., 4-35-10 Watanabe

Bldg. #201, Honcho Nakano-ku, Tokyo

164, Japan. T (81-3) 5342-7267

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Production: **Kaijyu Theater Co., Ltd.,**

Maison Igarashi, #402, 1-32-4,

Nishisugamo, Toshima-ku, Tokyo 164,

Japan. T (81-3) 3949-7507

F (81-3) 3825-8611

A masterpiece of contemporary urban pain and desperation, *Bullet Ballet* represents a major leap forward for Festival discovery Shinya Tsukamoto.

The film seeks nothing less than to explain the changes wrought in Japanese society over the last decade; for Tsukamoto, the nation's official collectivist work ideology, embodied by the ever-present "salaryman," has dissolved in the unbearable alienation and loneliness of its citizens. The result is violent, philosophically confrontational and deeply personal.

Goda – played by Tsukamoto with an astonishing visceral anguish – was a classic Tokyo yuppie. But his bustling life as a TV producer changed forever when his fiancée informed him that she was cancelling their wedding and soon after shot herself. Baffled in utter grief about her motives and how she obtained a weapon of such great destruction, he tries to re-engage in the world.

He meets a punky girl named Chisato near Shibuya train station, who lures him into an alley. But a group of young people – her friends – attack and humiliate him in brutal fashion. They also try to extort money out of him by seizing his identification. These kids aren't yakuza and aren't even professional criminals; they are a recent development of Japanese society: well-educated, middle-class kids looking for a few kicks before they go to university.

He seeks revenge, at first with ham-fisted recklessness, then with a gun, which he

literally stumbles upon. A brutal gangland fight sets the stage for Goda to clean this vermin from his streets and save Chisato from their clutches. But things don't work out exactly as planned.

Shot in hand-held black and white, the look of the film differs radically from Tsukamoto's *Tokyo Fist*, an intense and bloody boxing "love" story, and his classic cyberpunk *Tetsuo* films, about the dystopic synthesis of man and machine. In *Bullet Ballet*, the camera is even more intimately involved in the proceedings than the characters are themselves. The effect is breathtaking and frightening, leaving one with the disquieting feeling that this could well be a premonition of troubled times to come everywhere.

– Noah Cowan

Shinya Tsukamoto was born in Tokyo, Japan, in 1960. He studied oil painting during his high school and college years, and graduated from Nippon University in 1982. He then worked as a director of TV commercials for four years. His professional career as a film director began with the cutting-edge *Tetsuo – The Iron Man* (89). Selected filmography: *Tetsuo – The Iron Man* (89), *Hiruko, The Goblin* (90), *Tetsuo II – The Body Hammer* (91), *Tokyo Fist* (95) and *Bullet Ballet* (98).

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Beautiful Sunday

Tetsuya Nakashima

JAPAN, 1998

93 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
 Production Company: **FAT Inc.**
 Producer: **Motohiro Hatanaka, Haruo Takarada**
 Screenplay: **Tetsuya Nakashima**
 Cinematographer: **Shoichi Atoh**
 Editor: **Chiaki Toyama**
 Production Designer: **Tsuneo Kantake**
 Sound: **Yasuo Komori**
 Music: **Yoko Kanno**
 Principal Cast: **Masatoshi Nagase, Momoko Bitoh, Kumiko Nakamura, Noriko Nagi, Kyoko Endoh**

Print Source: **FAT Inc., 2-17-25-201, Midorigaoka Meguro-ku, Tokyo 152-0034, Japan. T (81-3) 3725-3754 F (81-3) 3725-3754**

Foreign Sales Agent: **Gold View Company Ltd., 4-35 10 Watanabe Bld., #201 Honcho Nakano-ku, Tokyo 164-0012. T (81-3) 5342-7267 F (81-3) 5342-7268**

Production: **FAT Inc., 2-17-25-201, Midorigaoka Meguro-ku, Tokyo 152-0034, Japan. T (81-3) 3725-3754 F (81-3) 3725-3754 E NaomiNaka@msn.com**

Tetsuya Nakashima's second film is a beautifully crafted and uplifting story, featuring the residents of one apartment building from dawn until dusk on a most unusual Sunday. By turns comic and wistful, he ends up saying much about the alienation of modern city life in a precise and entertaining fashion.

On the first floor, a young couple is woken up by inspectors responding to a noise complaint. The fractures in their relationship are clear but they decide to find a place to play catch instead of having a serious talk.

On the second floor, a half-American, half-Japanese girl sits glued to her desk, determined to earn the respect of her peers through the highest grades ever.

On the third floor, an extraordinary old lady screams in an amazingly loud voice, as she does every day as she prepares her tea.

The landlady furiously paints self-portraits in a run-down apartment she has never leased.

As we trace their daily interactions, we sense that a pivotal change is in the air, which comes with the old woman's ascent to the roof, where she announces that she is a visitor from another planet and will be going home that night.

Each story elegantly conveys the anxiety of modern life but none are heavy-handed.

Nakashima's camera – always intriguingly placed and perfectly composed – adds a kind of sparkling levity to the proceedings. So it is with a broad smile on her face and a

little chuckle that the old woman explains her daily vocal exhortations: "I scream every day so that people will know I am still alive. If they don't hear me screaming, then they will know I am dead or something happened to me."

– *Noah Cowan*

Tetsuya Nakashima was born in 1959. He graduated from Meiji University in 1983. Since leaving Japan Color Movie, he has been a free-lance director. Films include: *Happy Go Lucky* (95) and *Beautiful Sunday* (98).

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AIR CANADA



Rakuen

Paradise Sea

Koji Hagiuda

JAPAN, 1998

90 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
 Production Company: **Bitters End Inc./**
Japan Satellite Broadcasting
 Producer: **Takenori Sento, Koji Kobayashi**
 Screenplay: **Koji Hagiuda**
 Cinematographer: **Masaki Tamura**
 Editor: **Shuichi Kakesu**
 Production Designer: **Hidefumi Hanatani**
 Sound: **Nobuyuki Kikuchi**
 Music: **Masamichi Shigeno**
 Principal Cast: **Reiko Matsuo, Shinji**
Arano, Nobuyoshi Tanigawa, Fukuo
Sudo, Miwako Kawai

Print Source/Foreign Sales Agent: **Bitters**
End Inc., #101, Villa New Century,
10-5 Sakuragaoka-cho, Shibuya-ku,
Tokyo 150-0031, Japan.
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Production: **Bitters End Inc., #101, Villa**
New Century, 10-5 Sakuragaoka-cho,
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The quiet, meditative beauty of *Paradise Sea* places director Koji Hagiuda firmly in the circle of an influential group of new filmmakers, which includes Hirokazu Kore-Eda (*Maboroshi*) and Naomi Kawase (*Suzaku*). With their emphasis on the past and the power of memory, and their slow, deliberate rhythms and elegant cinematography, this group has been a major force in the international festival scene, scooping up awards at every stop.

Koji was Assistant Director on the set of *Suzaku* – Camera d'Or winner at the Cannes film festival in 1997 – and was credited by Kawase with having much influence on the film's final shape. (The film is also produced by Bitters End, the company behind *Suzaku*). Like other filmmakers in this group, he too is grounded in documentaries, even though he also worked closely with Kaizo Hayashi for many years; the influence of the maverick eighties filmmaker – at least of his more meditative films – is evident here as well.

Paradise Sea is set on a small island in the southern district of Kyushu. Old Man – he is never named – has lived his entire life there as a specialized craftsman of wooden boats. He now lives alone after the death of his wife. Suzue, his granddaughter, has dropped out of a city high school and come to stay with him indefinitely. As the film opens, a traditional dance troupe is packing up to leave, but its leader decides to stay on the island for undisclosed reasons. He soon joins the Old Man in his endeavour to build

an unusually large boat, and becomes increasingly obsessed by the ancient, dying craft. Two others from the troupe stay on, trying to find him.

Each character is engaged in a search – for lost traditions, for a sense of self, for a place in the world. Daringly elliptical, this richly textured tale is enormously moving and thought-provoking. Its wistful sense of the recent past is also a key characteristic of the New Beat filmmakers in this programme.

– Noah Cowan

Koji Hagiuda was born in Saitama prefecture, Japan, in 1967. Hagiuda started making 8mm films in high school, and eventually embarked on a career as an Assistant Director, working on numerous TV dramas, made-for-video features and feature films. *Paradise Sea* (98) is his first feature fiction film.

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Ikinai

Hiroshi Shimizu

JAPAN, 1998

101 minutes ■ Colour/35mm

Production Company: Office Kitano

Producer: Masayuki Mori

Screenplay: Dankan

Cinematographer: Katsumi Yanagishima

Editor: Yoshinori Ota

Production Designer: Norihiro Isoda

Sound: Senji Horiuchi

Music: Maya

Principal Cast: Dankan, Nanako Okouchi,

Toshinori Omi, Ippei Soda, Youichi

Nukumizu, Great Gidayu, Hiroyuki Kishi

Print Source: Office Kitano, 5-4-14

Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo 107-0052,

Japan. T (81-3) 3588-8121

F (81-3) 3589-0667

Foreign Sales Agent: Celluloid Dreams,

24 rue Lamartine, 75009 Paris, France.

T (33-1) 4970-0370 F (33-1) 4970-0371

Production: Office Kitano, 5-4-14

Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo 107-0052,

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F (81-3) 3589-0667

Aragaki, the leader of a three-day bus tour, is awaiting his final passenger at Naha Airport in Okinawa. At the last minute, a young woman named Mitsuki approaches him; she has come in place of her uncle, who had booked months before but is now unable to go. Little does she know that this is no ordinary bus tour. The other twelve members are heavily in debt and have plotted with Aragaki to make this a "suicide tour." Their aim is to collect life insurance money for their families to pay off their debt.

Through a series of word games, visits to tourist sites, karaoke and other structured social interactions, the twelve men, Mitsuki and the three tour operators come to know each other's plights and debate the merits of their course of action.

Hiroshi Shimizu's first feature film is a thoughtful, complex exploration of human sadness and redemption, told with much gentle humour and a genuine love for his pathetic characters. It explores many grand themes of Japanese culture – the public expression of shame through suicide, game-playing as social glue, the personalization of socio-economic decline – with a deft touch and a light heart.

This film comes from Office Kitano, the production/distribution entity formed by Takeshi Kitano (*Fireworks*), the enormously talented and world-famous maverick of current Japanese cinema, and his staff. It is the first non-Kitano film they have created.

Shimizu has been the great man's assistant director for many years, and the film's

writer and star, Dankan, is one of Kitano's comedy "Army" of apprentices. Yet the film is far removed from Kitano's existentialist gangsters; it feels closer to his lesser-known *A Scene At The Sea* and, especially, the playful beach sequences of *Sonatine*.

"Ikinai" means "can't or won't live." According to the director's statement, this might be a play on words with Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* ("to live"), or Kaneto Shindo's *Ikita* ("I want to live"); or it could recall the marketing slogan for the blockbuster animated film *Princess Mononoke*, "Ikiri!" ("You must live!").

Whatever the interpretation, *Ikinai* is a major accomplishment and marks a significant new talent on the international film scene.

– Noah Cowan

Hiroshi Shimizu was born in Kyoto, Japan, in 1964. After graduating from Yokohama Film School, he launched his career in the film industry as a freelance assistant director. He worked as chief assistant director on three Takeshi Kitano films, *Getting Any?* (96), *Kids Return* (97) and *Fireworks* (97). *Ikinai* (98) is his directorial debut.

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AIR CANADA



Samehadaotoko To Momojirionna

Shark Skin Man and Peach Hip Girl

Katsuhito Ishii

JAPAN, 1998

108 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
Production Company: Tohokushinsha
Film Corporation
Executive Producer: Hilo Iizumi
Producer: Kazuto Takida
Screenplay: Katsuhito Ishii, based
on the comic series by Minetaro
Mochizuki
Cinematographer: Hiroshi Machida
Editor: Yumiko Doi
Production Designer: Tomoyuki Maruo
Sound: Kohichi Mori
Principal Cast: Tadanobu Asano,
Sie Kohinata, Ittoku Kishibe, Susumu
Terashima, Kimie Shingyoji

Print Source/Foreign Sales Agent:
Tohokushinsha Film Corporation,
4-17-7 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo
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Production: Tohokushinsha Film
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"Screening the movie should almost be like reading a violent and funny manga."

— Katsuhito Ishii

Everything about *Shark Skin Man and Peach Hip Girl* is exciting. Electrically paced, the film is bursting with visual ideas, colours and lots of campy fun. Director Ishii established himself at a young age as one of Japan's premiere commercial filmmakers, and his innovative work in that field exhibits a fascination with a kind of "perverse chic" — an amalgam of unusual sex, speedy drugs, exquisite locations and clothing — in Japanese culture. One of his visual tropes in fact sees the characters all dressed in designer originals, in a style known as "hyper fashion gear" — to see is to believe! — except the leading man, who quick-changes through the clothes of super-hot designer Takeo Kikuchi.

With its crazed yakuza characters, homoeroticism and eye-popping look, *Shark Skin Man's* nearest antecedent is probably Kinji Fukasaku's *Black Lizard*, the Mishima-written gender-bending masterwork of 1968.

The film also features a sexy, winning performance from the poster boy of recent Japanese cinema, Tadanobu Asano. With credits like *Maboroshi*, *Focus*, *Helpless* and *Labyrinth of Dreams*, he is probably the most familiar Japanese face in the west since Toshiro Mifune's glory days.

Here Asano plays a spoiled yakuza brat, running down the road in only his (Takeo Kikuchi) underwear. A young ingenue

escaping from her sexually twisted and crazy uncle — the proprietor of a local hotel — sees him from her car window and promptly smashes into a carful of professional hit men. The young couple speeds away, pursued by the dazed killers and the bizarre Yamada, an automatic nerd hired by the heroine's uncle to bring her home. After a series of near-escapes and a respite with a flamboyant "dresser" — who gives them the monikers of the title — the pair are dragged back to the hotel for a most extraordinary climax.

— Noah Cowan

Katsuhito Ishii was born in 1966 in Niigata, Japan. While attending Musashino Art University, he became fascinated with American comic books and cinema. His interest in visual arts led him to direct a short animated film, *Wild World* in 1991. He has directed more than 80 commercials and has won numerous awards. Ishii wrote and directed his first live action short film *Promise in August* in 1994. *Shark Skin Man and Peach Hip Girl* (98) is his first feature film.

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