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culture: film

Wide angle

SIZE MATTERS
Kaori Shoji

"Small is Beautiful" is a documentary about the TH (Tiny House) movement, the latest underground trend in housing and real estate in the U.S. In the next few years, though, TH could go mainstream thanks to a growing online community that shares information about what's on the TH market and how to actually build a micro-homes yourself. The average floor size of newly built homes in North America is over 200 sq. meters, but the TH movement proposes downsizing families of four to 18.5-sq.-meter wheeled homes — that's the standard size of a single-person apartment in Tokyo.

I'd like to take a moment to bask in the glory of smallness, which is — let's face it — every Japanese person's birthright. For a long time we were taught our tiny living spaces were a crying shame in the global scheme of things, but hey! Now they're saying micro-homes are fashionable, so there. If only my grandmother — who shed tears of pity when she stepped into my first apartment, which consisted of 5.5 tatami mats and a bathroom the size of a lunch plate — was around to see this.

"Small is Beautiful" tells us, among other things, that the option to go small is liberating, ecological and happiness-inducing. Huge houses (aka "McMansions"), on the other hand, often guzzle resources while entrapping people in the debt-grind known as the 35-year mortgage. The documentary is available online from April 30 and you can preorder a copy from www.smallbeautifulmovie.com.



Is there life after death for Japan's aging women?

Mark Schilling
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

When Katsumi Sakaguchi quit working as a documentary filmmaker in the spring 2008 to look after his mother Suchie, he thought he was doing the right thing. Then 78, Suchie was suffering from what Sakaguchi describes as "mental confusion" following the death of her daughter from cancer two years earlier and the recent hospitalization of her husband, who later died of pneumonia.

"I had to choose between my work and my mother, so, of course, I chose my mother," says the veteran documentarian, whose film "Hoyo" ("Walking with My Mother"), about his subsequent four years of caring for Suchie, premiered at last year's Tokyo International Film Festival.

"She was the one who bore and raised me. I felt I had to do it," he says. But after moving back to his parents' house in Saitama Prefecture, Sakaguchi soon found himself overwhelmed. Just how much so is made clear by the shocking scenes that begin the film, with the distraught Suchie in the grip of a full-blown panic attack, convinced she is about to die.

"It was really tough for me to see that," Sakaguchi says. "She was so strong when she was younger — the change was very sudden."

Faced with her incessant demands for attention, Sakaguchi began to break down himself.

"All I could see of my future was this life, alone with my mother — it was like gazing into a black hole," he says.

Instead of succumbing to his frustration and anger ("I felt like hitting her," he says), he picked up a camera and began filming.

"It gave me the distance I needed — I could see her more objectively," he explains. "The camera saved me."

But Sakaguchi "wasn't thinking (of making a film) at all when I started," he says. As he kept shooting everything from Suchie's night terrors to her visits to a



Bath time: Suchie Sakaguchi (left) takes a hot bath with her sister Mariko in her son Katsumi's documentary "Walking with My Mother." The film shows Suchie before and after she moves back to the island town where she grew up. © SUPERSAURUS

local day care center for the elderly (for which she bravely found a smiling face), he inadvertently found a story all too common in today's urbanized Japan, with its small nuclear families and weak community ties.

"She was among the first wave of Japanese who found themselves alone after their kids had left and their spouse had died," he says. "The support network that they might once have had isn't there any more. And in 10 years, when the baby boomers hit their 70s, the problem is going to be a lot worse."

Too often this story has an unhappy ending, with the lonely senior slipping — as Suchie was — into depression and ill health.

"She was taking tranquilizers to feel better, but she would take too many pills at once and feel worse as a result," Saka-

guchi says. "It was a downward spiral."

What pulled her out of this spiral — and what makes "Walking with My Mother" a surprisingly positive and even inspirational experience — is her return to Tanegashima, the island off Kagoshima Prefecture's southern coast where she was raised and where many members of her family still live. Though she had not been back in 38 years, Suchie found a warm welcome, especially from her younger sister Mariko, with whom she had been the closest among her seven siblings. On camera, Mariko impresses as a funny, energetic, caring font of common sense. After feeding her sister cake and making her smile, Mariko tells her that "on Tanegashima, you'll eat well, meet people and laugh."

That turns out to be a simple-but-effective general prescription for Suchie's

recovery, though she has many more ups and downs. By the film's end the younger Suchie we see in family photographs, looking straight and fearlessly into the lens, has begun to return.

"It's a kind of miracle," Sakaguchi says. "She was extremely lucky."

Sakaguchi himself feels "very fortunate" to have "walked" with his mother during the four years of filming. The experience taught him "the importance of having friends and family," he says.

"I'm still unmarried — like 40 percent of all Japanese — but now I want to find a wife," he adds with a laugh. "I'm hoping it's not too late."

His concern, however, is that many Japanese in Tokyo and elsewhere who moved to the big city either individually or with their families to take part in the postwar economic boom are now

'She was among the first wave of Japanese who found themselves alone after their kids had left and their spouse has died.'

DIRECTOR KATSUMI SAKAGUCHI

stranded as they become older and more isolated.

"They have no *furusato* (hometown or native place) to return to and no one around them to support them," he says. "It's a major social problem."

He believes, though, that it's possible to find your own *furusato*, even in the city.

"You have to realize that you can't be alone in this world — that you need others to live," he says.

It's now two years after he stopped filming and Suchie, he says, is still doing well.

"She was embarrassed at first that I was doing this. Her reaction was 'Who would want to see a film about me?'" he says. But, for Sakiguchi, her very ordinariness makes it easier for the Japanese audience to relate.

"What she experienced — the war, the postwar boom — is what many Japanese experienced. If she had been a Nobel Prize winner, that wouldn't have been the case."

How does she feel about the film now? "She feels it was something she was meant to do," Sakaguchi says.

"She would be happy if it gives people a bit of strength."

All screenings at Theater Image Forum in Tokyo will be subtitled in English. For more information, visit www.houyomovie.com



© 2015 "RYUZO TO SHICHININ NO KOBUN TACHI" SEISAKU INKAI

Takeshi Kitano's nursing-home yakuza

Ryuzo and the Seven Henchmen (Japan title: Ryuzo to Shichinin no Kobuntachi)
★★★★☆ 111 MINS; JAPANESE; NOW SHOWING
Reviewed by Mark Schilling

Takeshi Kitano has had some of his biggest critical and commercial successes with gangster films, beginning with his 1993 international breakthrough "Sonatine" and continuing through to his 2012 hit "Outrage Beyond" ("Beyond Outrage"), which screened in competition at the 2012 Venice Film Festival.

But as chillingly violent as his yakuza characters can be, they often have a blackly humorous side as well. When the gangsters in "Beyond Outrage" operatically vent on an unfortunate underling, it sounds something like a *manzai* (comic duo) insult routine.

In his new film "Ryuzo to Shichinin no Kobuntachi" ("Ryuzo and the Seven Henchmen"), Kitano brings this comic undercurrent to the surface. Based on his own script about a gang of elderly retired yakuza, "Ryuzo" is intended as a laugh riot from beginning to end, with no glum reflections whatsoever on the plight of the aged. And it mostly is, though it helps to be a genre fan to get the inside jokes.

Now 68 and thus eligible for a senior discount card himself, Kitano may also be poking fun at his graying *dankai no seidai* (Japanese baby boomer) generation — once so cool but now sinking into decrepitude. He is most certainly having a laugh at yakuza genre formulas, beginning with the myth of the noble gangster.

The film's driving force is star Tatsuya Fuji, who in the 1960s and early 1970s frequently played gangsters and punks, including a bike gang leader in Nikkatsu's "Nora Neko Rock" ("Stray Cat Rock") series, but has long since matured into a versatile actor appearing in everything from mainstream hits to the films of Nagisa Oshima, Kiyoshi Kurosawa and other internationally prominent directors.

In "Ryuzo" Fuji reverts to outlaw type as the title character, a retired gang boss bored silly living a quiet life with his peace-loving salaryman son (Masanobu

Katsumura). He enjoys get-togethers with a loyal former lieutenant (Masaomi Kondo), though Ryuzo's hot temper can make the civilians around them nervous. One day, the aging gangster gets a cell-phone call from a scammer pretending to be his son. The scammer requests ¥5 million to get him out of a job-threatening jam, but Ryuzo gets wise before he hands over the dough.

After hearing from a grizzled cop (Kitano) that the scammer and his crew belong to the Keihin Rengo gang, Ryuzo rounds up some old associates for organized payback. But when they gather in Ueno Park at the symbolic statue of Saigo Takamori, famed as "the last samurai," he sees that these once-fearsome henchmen have become shambling wrecks.

"Fast-draw Mac" (Toru Shinagawa), named for his love of 1970s action star Steve McQueen, brandishes a loaded pistol but is too palsied to shoot straight. Portly former gang boss Mokichi (Akira Nakao) borrows pitiful sums from all and sundry. And "Stick Ichizo" (Ben Hiura) carries his trademark sword concealed in a walking stick, but instead of enemies he now mostly stabs cigarette butts.

How can this motley crew of pensioners — some on temporary leave from a nursing home or with one foot in the grave — take on the ruthless Keihin Rengo boss (Ken Yasuda) and his youthful (by comparison) gang? But take them on they do, with a pluck that's pathetic and ridiculous, if somehow admirable.

What gives their feeble acts of derring-do a thin veneer of credibility is Fuji's bravado performance as Ryuzo. Though looking every one of his 74 real-life years, Fuji brings a volatile energy to proceedings that would otherwise be merely absurd. Like many actors in Kitano's yakuza epics, Fuji seems to thoroughly enjoy being let off the leash of "art" to storm about on screen. At the same time, he takes Ryuzo's frustrations and resentments seriously. In other words, there's plenty of scrappy life in the old guy yet. And when he starts raging against the dying of the light, look out for flying debris — and prepare to laugh.



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Will Smith under a money waterfall

Focus
★★★★☆ 105 MINS; ENGLISH, SPANISH (SUBTITLED IN JAPANESE); OPENS MAY 1
Reviewed by Kaori Shoji

Will Smith rarely smiles when he isn't running around in a "Men in Black" film. Which is a shame, because comedy and Smith seem like a natural match, especially when he is paired with Tommy Lee Jones, his trusted curmudgeon buddy in the MIB series.

In "Focus" there's no Tommy Lee but you'll see Smith laugh, emote and even engage in a love affair or two. The dude even has brunch at the Hyatt and, overall, Smith seems to be relaxed and enjoying himself, which is more than you can say about his last few vehicles since "Men in Black 3." Case in point: "Winter's Tale," in which Smith plays a sour, deadpan Lucifer who scares the daylights out of Russell Crowe's mumbly demon. Not fun.

It seems he has found another partner, albeit one who bears no earthly resemblance to Jones — no wonder Smith is smiling. Written and directed by Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, "Focus" is gorgeous to look at and sweet on the palate, like a piece of candy you want to roll in your palm before popping in your mouth. A huge part of that is due to the ultra-glorious looks and on-screen sheen sported by Margot Robbie, who's clearly channeling Grace Kelly or Kim Novak. The other parts are due to the all the visible wealth: hotel suites, cars, wardrobe, jewelry, French cuisine and the actual wads of cash flung about in almost every scene.

"Focus" is a con movie and, as such, takes huge liberties with money. It's as if no one involved had ever heard of the word "austerity." Take that, Angela Merkel.

The snag here is that the plot isn't terribly original; in fact, it borrows heavily from classics like "The Sting," "The Grifters" and "The Thomas Crown Affair" to name just a few. Still, when you consider that one of the objectives of the con

genre is to elevate the act of pilfering to a form of museum-level art, it seems a matter of course that "Focus" should steal from the greats. Too bad that Ficarra and Requa didn't bother with depicting back stories or flesh out the characters with a scene or two where they were struggling with hard times — it's pretty much plain sailing and raking in cash every step of the way. Though, on occasion, Smith does his best to resemble a sentimental schmuck who let the love of his life get away while losing the cash equivalent of a governmental defense budget (not saying which government), don't let him fool you.

From the get-go, Smith comes out on top as con man Nicky.

In the opening sequence, Nicky is in a hotel having dinner when he gets hit on by a stunning blonde named Jess (Robbie). It's not long before they're rolling around on her hotel bed, but in walks her "husband" brandishing a gun and demanding compensation. In a matter of seconds Nicky has disarmed him and is giving the scamming pair a lecture on how to do this right (the secret is getting the victim's pants down before getting him on the bed).

Jess is awed, and she may even be in love, though it's hard to read what Nicky himself is thinking. The relationship stalls at first, then blooms in New Orleans during a huge football event (apparently, the film couldn't get the license to use the words "Super Bowl") where Nicky reveals his next con to Jess, which runs with militant efficiency and involves deploying an army of thieves and pickpockets.

Interestingly, Nicky shows himself to be as committed and hardworking as any loyal salaryman. Even more intriguing is the fact that, when you calculate the number of hours he puts in and the amount of people on his payroll, Nicky's hourly wage isn't all that spectacular. But that's OK — he's in it for the adrenaline, and so is Jess.

If a sequel is in the works (as is hinted at the end), theirs could be the start of a beautiful relationship.



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The prescience of 'Hearts and Minds'

Hearts and Minds
★★★★★ 112 MINS; ENGLISH, FRENCH, VIETNAMESE (SUBTITLED IN JAPANESE); NOW SHOWING
Reviewed by Giovanni Fazio

The stereotype of "liberal Hollywood" was etched into stone when director Peter Davis and producer Bert Schneider took the stage at the Oscars on April 8, 1975. Receiving the best documentary award for their incendiary Vietnam War film "Hearts and Minds," Schneider read out a telegram expressing greetings from the Vietnamese people and the Provisional Revolutionary Government, to both applause and hissing.

Vietnam was still an open wound, but three weeks later, it would all be over, as the last American helicopters evacuated the embassy in Saigon. The war had been such a long, divisive nightmare that, once finished, it seemed like America wanted nothing more than to forget.

At least one lesson was learned by all: Endless counter-insurgency wars in countries where people didn't want you were not a good idea. This knowledge held for a good two generations, until America got enmeshed in slipshod wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, launched by the Vietnam draft-evading triumvirate of then-President George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld.

Saying that history repeats itself may be trite, but, watching "Hearts and Minds" some 40 years on, you'll be gobsmacked by how true it is.

The film captures presidents lying to the American public about the reasons for the war, counterproductive aerial bombing raids that kill civilians and, yes, even the waterboarding of prisoners.

There's returned prisoner of war Lt. George Coker who, when asked by school kids what Vietnam was like, says, "If it wasn't for the people, it was very pretty." Gen. William Westmoreland comments that the "Oriental doesn't value life like the Westerner."

Flash forward in time and recall Chris Kyle's memoir "American Sniper," where

he writes that he couldn't "give a flying f--- about Iraqis."

If the goal of a guerrilla war is to win the "hearts and minds" of the population — as President Lyndon B. Johnson says in the film — how are you supposed to do that if you have nothing but contempt for the locals?

Despite its anti-war sympathies, "Hearts and Minds" is a clear snapshot of the time, filmed both in the U.S. and Vietnam, and contrasts how the war was affecting both societies.

In light of our own era of drone warfare, the documentary's most powerful moments may come from former bomber pilot Cpt. Randy Floyd, who — like most of the veterans in the film — describes himself as being a patriotic conservative when he enlisted. He speaks of using a computer program to drop his ordinance, noting, "It was very much a technical expertise thing." He also speaks of "the thrill you get when you watch something explode," adding, "You're doing a job. You never see any blood." Davis cuts away to a bomb crater where a Vietnamese man's home used to be, as the man tearfully describes losing many members of his family.

It's an obvious point to make about the increasingly remote nature of warfare, which is reinforced when Floyd reflects on the fact that Americans have never experienced that sort of bombardment, and imagines what he would feel like if it happened to his family. The remorse he feels is evident and powerful.

War supporters also get their moments, and what's striking is how abstract their justifications for the war are, ranging from the old "domino theory" to Lt. Coker saying, "The reason we went there was to win this war" and the father of a soldier killed in action saying, "That's the price you pay for freedom."

Davis cuts to the crowd at a football game screaming "We're No. 1!" and a red-faced coach in the locker room yelling at his boys, not unlike a drill sergeant, to win one for the team. The problem with the militarization of the U.S., Davis implies, also resides in hearts and minds.