

Japan Cuts brings provocative new films to New York City

By [Daniel Eagan](#) Jul 12, 2016

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ScreenerBlog



Running July 14-24, the tenth edition of [Japan Cuts](#) highlights close to 30 feature films, many of them premieres, all of them increasingly difficult to see anywhere else. Screening at New York City's Japan Society, the series includes dramas, comedies, documentaries, panels, and over 20 special guests.

Programmed by Aiko Masubuchi, Kazu Watanabe and Joel Neville Anderson, Japan Cuts is celebrated for its high standards and its eclectic slate. This year's selections range

from period dramas and crowd-pleasing hits to demanding avant-garde works.

The festival's centerpiece presentation is the North American premiere of *The Shell Collector*, starring Lily Franky, recipient of the "Cut Above" award for outstanding performance in film. Franky, who will attend the July 21 screening, plays a professor who discovers a mysterious shellfish in director Yoshifumi Tsubota's movie, which was adapted from an Anthony Doerr story.

Franky appears in two other Japan Cuts selections, *Bakuman* (July 17) and *Three Stories of Love* (July 18). He also has a poignant role in Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Our Little Sister*, a Sony Pictures Classics release which opened in New York on July 8.

Other guests include Academy Award-winning composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, who will introduce the U.S. premiere of director Yoji Yamada's haunting *Nagasaki: Memories of My Son* (July 17). (Sakamoto recently scored *The Revenant* for director Alejandro González Iñárritu.)

Cult fans will be eager to see the experimental poet and director Sion Sono, showcased at Japan Cuts for the third time. He is the subject of the documentary *The Sion Sono* (July 16), and later that day will introduce (via video) the New York premieres of two movies. *The Whispering Star* follows a humanoid worker (played by Megumi Kagurazaka, who will be present) as she travels through space making

deliveries to humans on the verge of extinction. And *Love & Peace* is a sci-fi fantasy years in the making.

In honor of the series' tenth anniversary, *Classics: Flash-back/Flash-forward* compares filmmakers' early works with their recent releases. Ryosuke Hashiguchi's *Hush!* (July 18) appeared on the 2001 slate; it will be followed by Hashiguchi's award-winning *Three Stories of Love* (2015), which follows its three leads as they cope with emotional unhappiness. Other filmmakers celebrated in *Classics: Flash-back/Flash-forward* include Gakuryu (Sogo) Ishii and the team of Junji Sakamoto and Naomi Fujiyama.



Experimental Spotlight: Anime Vanguard (July 18) includes a dozen animated shorts being screened for the first time in New York City, introduced by animator Onohana.

One theme that emerges in the series' comedies is a sense of reduced expectations, coupled with a loss of faith in political and economic structures. Some of the titles find their characters grappling with new, unexpected realities.

Opening Japan Cuts on July 14, *Mohican Comes Home* follows a failed punk singer as he flees Tokyo for his home in Hiroshima, only to become guardian of his ill and hostile father. In *Emi-Abi* (July 24), a comedy duo's straight man struggles with his future when he loses his partner in an accident. *Lowlife Love* (July 15) goes much darker, using the dregs of the porno industry for a parable about rekindling lost dreams.

Even the calm, low-key *The Magnificent Nine* (July 16), the cinematic equivalent of comfort food, skirts with disillusionment. Based on a true story, the movie by director Yoshihiro Nakamura follows oppressed villagers in the 18th-century countryside as they use loans and interest to outwit the lord ruling their lives.



Screening July 24, *Flying Colors* is a delight, a comedy about a self-professed loser who decides to apply to the prestigious Keio University. A box-office hit in Japan, Nobuhiro Doi's movie was based on a best-selling book by a teacher in a workshop helping remedial students prepare for entrance exams. Sort of like a cut-rate Kaplan SAT clinic.

A fast-paced montage introduces Sayaka (played as a teen by the marvelous Arimura Kasumi) as a moody youth who gives up on learning to hang with her three best friends.

Shamed by her father, she turns over a new leaf with teacher Tsubota (Ito Satsushi), a wizard at using psychology to inspire his students.

Sayaka is impressively stupid—she doesn't know north from south, reads at a fourth-grade level, and can't identify Japan on a map—but her spirit and logic are irresistible. And her teasing but respectful relationship with Tsubota is consistently intriguing. Does he believe in her, or is he only trying to cadge more money?

Periodic cracks appear in what is supposed to be a bright, sunny story. Sayaka's parents are trapped in a bitter marriage filled with recriminations. Her high-school teacher doesn't bother to hide his contempt for her. And even if she gets into college, Sayaka's future prospects look bleak.

The cracks widen into fissures in Japan Cuts' closing film, *The Actor*. Based on a novel by Akito Inui, Satoko Yokohama's film follows bit player Takuji Kameoka (played by the exceptional Ken Yasuda) as he auditions for roles, rehearses a stage play, appears as an extra in action movies, and mostly drinks himself into oblivion.

The dreamy, elliptical plotting mirrors Kameoka's serious alcoholism, the camera fading slowly to black as his head drops onto a bar, then roaring to life as he finds himself on a train to his next gig. Friends and workers marvel at Kameoka's integrity and expertise as a performer. But despite his skill, he's clearly going nowhere.

Tucked into the corners of the story are wonderful parodies of gangster movies, kung fu films, and an especially pretentious brand of experimental theatre. Opening with a tremendous gag about the best way to die onscreen, *The Actor* hurtles by projects like *Cat Zombie Panic* and *Sunny Day in Corsica* before zeroing in on some hilariously inept attempts at filmmaking.

Kameoka is a dream role for Ken Yasuda, who uses a soup-bowl haircut and hangdog expression to capture his character's perseverance and almost total lack of self-esteem. Dark but not quite despairing, *The Actor* is a deadpan work of art.

And like many of the other selections in Japan Cuts, *The Actor* opens a window into an endlessly fascinating world and culture. With its tenth edition, Japan Cuts continues its tradition of bringing provocative, rewarding movies to New York.



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