

Road map for increasingly accessible world of Japanese cinema

The Asian Bookshelf DONALD RICHIE

JAPANESE CINEMA, by Stuart Galbraith IV. Taschen, 2009, 192 pp., 354 photographs, \$29.99 (hardcover)

This is a large (23.1 cm by 28.9 cm), fully illustrated account of Japanese film from its beginnings. There have now been a number of such histories, each perforce written from different perspectives and using various paradigms and methodologies. This latest entry, from

the esteemed author of "The Emperor and the Wolf" — the most detailed study of director Akira Kurosawa and his iconic leading actor Toshiro Mifune — begins from the premise that there is now so much more to see.

Indeed there is. "Even outside Japan, more Japanese movies have been released in the last few years than in the previous 20 combined," Galbraith notes. Heretofore the viewer was largely confined to selected works of Akira Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasujiro Ozu. Now, by way of the Internet and DVD, the viewer can see representative slices of the work of many other directors, including Shohei Imamura, Mikio Naruse, Keisuke Kinoshita and Yoji

Yamada, a director whose work in particular Galbraith believes to be "criminally neglected in the West." Working to remedy that condition with the American DVD label Anima Eigo, he will in November present the U.S. premieres of four Yamada films, all from the popular "Tora-san" series.

Galbraith has long been interested in the role of the DVD in the propagation of film. In addition to his books he also until recently had a column on new local DVD releases in *The Daily Yomiuri*. Victim of the ailing economy now afflicting all newspapers, it was a column as much appreciated as its absence is regrettable.

Another major theme in this new book is Galbraith's belief that "if you want to

understand the Japanese psyche, Japanese cinema is full of insight on how the Japanese see themselves."

Presenting the search for these insights, especially with the complications of all the new material, called for a new narrative device. Here Galbraith sensibly adopts for historical perspectives ("Great Filmmakers of the 1950s & 1960s") and genre discussions ("Comedies, Musicals & Romance," "Monster Movies," "Anime.")

Particularly valuable is the ultimate section on "The Second New Wave." Here perhaps "other genres have taken a back seat to the violence and horror of the younger generation," but directors such as the late Shinji Somai and Hirokazu

Koreeda carry on and create new traditions. Not all has been lost "in the mad scramble for the hip and the subversive."

Rounding off the valuable accounting of Japanese film is a handy chronology (from 1896 to 2007) and a usefully selective bibliography. The editing of text and stills is also excellent. The person here responsible is Paul Duncan, also editor of Taschen's massive compendiums on Stanley Kubrick, Ingmar Bergman and other directors.

There are also several publication anomalies. One is that the contents page lists the cover image as coming from a film about Sada Abe, the lady who famously "de-fused" her lover. And on

some Internet displays of the cover, there it is — all sex, gore, blood, knife. My physical review copy of the book, however, has on its cover merely an innocuous reproduction of Toshiro Mifune and Kaoru Yashigusa, side by loving side, in "Miyamoto Musashi."

The mistake (if it is that) is illustrative of the double nature of this interesting and innovative publishing house. Besides such valuable scholarship as Galbraith's and serious editorship as Duncan's, it also presents much popular erotica. A recent seller was "The Big Book of Breasts," which one trade paper called "a bust out success," and its recent companion volume is "The Big Penis Book," both reflecting the double heritage of this house.