



JAPAN 2021 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

Fire Festival (Himatsuri)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Mitsuo Yanagimachi is the foremost independent director of his generation in Japan, coming midway between the last of the industry-trained filmmakers (Oshima, Shinoda, Yoshida, et. al.) and the current generation of film-course graduates (Ishii, Yamakawa, Nagasaki, et. al.). *Fire Festival* is his fourth feature, but the first to reach British distribution; his previous films have been seen only at the Edinburgh and London Film Festivals.

He was born in Ibaraki Prefecture in 1944, and graduated in Law from Waseda University. His film career began as an assistant on documentaries and educational films. He founded his own company, Gunro, in 1974, and his first production was the 16 mm documentary *God Speed You! Black Emperor* (1976), made over ten months with a motorcycle gang in Shinjuku. It was bought by Toei and blown up to 35 mm for national distribution, and its success paved the way for Yanagimachi to move into fiction filmmaking. His first two features were *Juku-sai no Chizu (A 19-Year-Old's Plan, 1979)* and *Saraba Itoshiki Daiichi (Farewell to the Land, 1982)*. *A 19-Year-Old's Plan* was based on a novel by Kenji Nakagami (born 1946), whose first original screenplay is *Fire Festival*.

Fire Festival was completed in 1984 and premiered at Cannes in May 1985. It was released in Japan (concurrently with Kurosawa's *Ran*) the following month. Its appearance prompted the publication of two books: *Himatsuri (Fire Festival)*, a collection of essays and interviews edited by Masao Yamaguchi, and Kenji Nakagami's *Hi no Bungaku (The Literature of Fire)*, which includes a long discussion of the implications of fire festivals and his script for the film.

Mitsuo Yanagimachi on 'Fire Festival'

Fire Festival was inspired by a newspaper item that appeared in 1980, and I went into the facts in great detail before I started thinking about the script. The real-life murderer was a stone mason in his mid-forties. I immediately understood a lot about him from reading about his domestic situation: he was married with two kids, he'd lost his father early, and he grew up in a matriarchal family with his mother and four elder sisters. Westerners find it hard to understand, but it still has enormous meaning to be the eldest son in a Japanese family; there are huge psychological pressures, and they would be exaggerated further by being the only man in a family of women. He also had a job that involved working with tools like stone drills and mechanical cutters which can often cause nervous disorders and sometimes lead to schizophrenia. Nearly all of this was clear to me from the original news story.

I had decided to change his job for the film even before I approached Nakagami about the collaboration. Making him a lumberjack would give him a reason for going into the forests, and it would set up his relationships with other men and women and with the gods. After making *Farewell to the Land* (which was filmed where I was born and grew up, and had a lot to do with my sense of my own identity), I wanted to go a bit further to show not only a man's relationship to the land, but also his sense of what stands behind him, out of his sight. In short, I wanted to deal with his sense of the divine. And that's also why I chose to film in Kumano; it's a district where the gods of place are powerful enough to attract and manipulate men.

I don't believe that films can ever reconstitute 'reality' – and neither should they. I think filmmakers should always tell stories of their own, however much they are anchored in research. The story that Nakagami and I invented owes very little to the facts that inspired us. The characters of Kimiko and Ryota, for example, were added to the story by Nakagami; there are no real-life prototypes. And I tried to use the villagers in the film as a kind of Greek chorus – another intimation of the 'divine'; none of the relations I show in the film had any basis in reality.

The *shinto* tradition in Japan relates to the absence of any Christ-figure in Japanese theology. Many natural features of the Japanese landscape (waterfalls, large rocks, particularly ancient trees, and so on) have been seen as being inhabited by gods, and venerated accordingly. It's a pantheistic tradition. It has little or nothing to do with ethics, but it has always had a strong sexual element. The Japanese people today are much less sensitive to these things than their ancestors were, and in that respect Tatsuo in the film is something of a throwback.

There are fire festivals all over Japan, but most of them have become very tourist-oriented. One of the reasons I was attracted to the festival in Kumano is that it has kept much of its authentic character; Kumano is too remote to attract many visitors, and the festival is more or less the same now as it was a thousand or more years ago. It's an all-male festival, and the ritual side of it has to do with proofs of masculinity. (There are Japanese festivals for women too, but the most ancient ones are solely male). The *shinto* element in the festival is partly in the drive to purification and partly in the relationship between fire and death. In Japan, fire symbolises the soul or spirit. If one wants to establish contact with the dead, one uses the medium of fire to do it. I tried to counterpoint this by using water in the film as a symbol of life.

A lot of my friends in Japan have told me that they thought it was basically a homosexual film. When Ryuichi Sakamoto saw it, he commented that I should have had Tatsuo kiss Ryota during the scene of the storm in the forest. I didn't think that was necessary myself, but I certainly shot it as a kind of love scene. It's a story of what is transmitted from man to man (in that sense, it resembles some of Mishima's work) and I hope it's clear that Ryota takes Tatsuo's place after his death. There's definitely an element of homosexuality in that process of transmission, but that's not something I ever discussed directly with Nakagami. The focus of his script was less on homosexuality than on narcissism – it's more that the men love themselves than that they love each other.

My next film will be different, but all three fiction films I've made so far are centred on characters who are in some sense heroes to me. I think absolute self-love is one of the characteristics of heroism, and the highest form of self-love always contains loneliness – the same loneliness felt by a ruler who has absolute power. Every male secretly desires to be a ruler or a homosexual – it's a universal desire, always linked with self-love. I think that stereotypical 'heroism' has a lot to do with all this. Tatsuo's fixation on his own genitals expresses the tension between his self-love and his love for others.

Japan is no longer isolated. It used to be difficult to travel from Tokyo to Edinburgh, but it's now easy. I find that many of my former certainties are challenged when I go abroad. But there have always been values that I wanted to cling to. Two cultures are always both similar and different, and it's the difference that I want to go on exploring.

Mitsuo Yanagimachi interviewed by Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1986

FIRE FESTIVAL (HIMATSURI)

Director: Mitsuo Yanagimachi
Production Companies: Gunro Productions, Seibu Group, Cine Saison
Executive Producer: Kazuo Shimizu
Production Managers: Shinji Komiya, Shima Anzai
Assistant Director: Yusuke Narita
Screenplay: Kenji Nakagami
Based on the story by: Kenji Nakagami
Photography: Masaki Tamura
Lighting: Hisashi Takaya
Visual effects: Minoru Nakano
Editor: Sachiko Yamaji
Art Director: Takeo Kimura
Set Decorator: Akiyoshi Kanda
Costumes: Daiichi Costumes
Make-up: Yamada Katsura Company
Music: Toru Takemitsu
Choreography: Shinichi Ikeda
Sound Recording: Yukio Kubota
Sound Effects: Yukio Hokari
Fight Director: Tadahiro Kunii
Stunts: Masao Takahashi

Cast

Kinya Kitaoji (*Tatsuo*)
Kiwako Taichi (*Kimiko*)
Ryota Najamoto (*Ryota*)
Norihei Miki (*Yamakawa*)
Rikiya Yasuoka (*Toshio*)
Seiji Kurasaki (*Koji*)
Maiko Kawakami (*Maiko*)
Junko Miyashita (*Sachiko, Tatsuo's Wife*)
Kin Sugai (*Tatsuo's Mother*)
Sachiko Matsushita, Masako Yagi (*Tatsuo's sisters*)
Jukei Fujioka, Nenji Kobayashi, Ippei Sooda (*lumberjacks*)
Aoi Nakajima (*Kimiko's sister*)
Kenzô Kaneko (*sister's husband*)
Ban Kojika (*ironmonger*)
Masato Ibu (*mobile shop owner*)
Kosanji Yanagiya (*boatman*)
Aiko Morishita (*child minder*)
Eiichi Kudo (*lumberjacks' driver*)
Yosuke Naka, Gozo Sooma, Koji Miemachi, Yuzuko Kinoshita, Mitsuyo Inomata, Reiko Nanao, Shiro Shimomoto, Yuhei Kurachi, Remon Horii, Baiken Jukkanji, Akira Sakai, Atsushi Imaizumi (*fishermen*)

Japan 1984
120 mins

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Fire Festival (Himatsuri)

Mon 20 Dec 17:50; Mon 27 Dec 13:20

Suzaku (Moe No Suzaku)

Tue 21 Dec 17:45; Thu 30 Dec 21:00

Shall We Dance? (Shall we dansu?)

Tue 21 Dec 20:30; Thu 30 Dec 17:40

In the Realm of the Senses (Ai no corrida)

Wed 22 Dec 18:20

Love Letter

Wed 22 Dec 20:50; Tue 28 Dec 12:10

Tokyo Drifter (Tôkyô nagaremono)

Thu 23 Dec 18:30

Muddy River (Doro no kawa)

Thu 23 Dec 20:40

Funeral Parade of Roses (Bara no sôretsu)

Mon 27 Dec 15:50

The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On

(Yuki Yukite, Shingun)

Mon 27 Dec 18:20

Tampopo

Tue 28 Dec 15:10

Black Rain (Kuroi ame)

Tue 28 Dec 18:15

After Life (Wandafuru raifu)

Wed 29 Dec 14:20

Moving (Ohikkoshi)

Wed 29 Dec 20:30

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