

Media-Film Production (Career Field Presentation)

John Williams, CEO (100 Meter Films)

N.B. The following is a quick overview, based on notes prepared for John Williams's presentation.

SELF INTRODUCTION

I came to Japan in 1988 and lived for twelve years in Nagoya, where I taught English for a language school for two years, before becoming a part-time University teacher. I was active making short films in Nagoya from the year I arrived and made several short films and a documentary, before attempting to make a longer project, Midnight Spin (70 mins, 16mm) in 1994. This project enabled me to raise finance to make a first feature film, Firefly Dreams (Ichiban Utsukushii Natsu) in 1999, which was released in 2001. Firefly Dreams won several awards at International Film Festivals and I was nominated for a Best Newcomer Director award by the Japanese Director's Guild. In order to make this first film I established a company called 100 Meter Films. We shot our second feature, Starfish Hotel in 2005, and it was released in 2007. Currently we have a slate of feature films in development, some of them Japanese feature films with young Japanese directors, my own projects and larger projects that we aim to complete as co-productions. We also work with METI and UNIJAPAN, running regular workshops to develop more international co-productions, under a scheme called J-Pitch. My route into the industry was very unusual. I did not go to film school or work for any other production company. This is one possible route, but I would not really recommend it to anyone as it took a long time.

THE JAPANESE FILM INDUSTRY

The Japanese film industry is one of the most robust and successful in the world. Last year Japanese feature films exceeded Hollywood films at the box office and for several years Japanese films have had a large share of the domestic market. However, most of the top grossing films are made by the two or three major companies, notably Toho in conjunction with Fuji TV and Dentsu. Most of the successful domestic feature films are very "domestic" and do not sell outside Japan. Only 1% of the revenues of Japanese feature films come from foreign sales.

The major companies dominate the market but there are almost one hundred, maybe more, production companies. Last year over 400 Japanese films got released, so competition is fierce and many, maybe most Japanese films lose money. There were a few films by independent companies that broke out and were successful.

Since so many films are being made there are lots of opportunities to become involved with film production, but very few foreigners working in the Japanese film industry. The success of *The Last Samurai* and *Lost in Translation*, and the home-grown success of *The Grudge*, have led to a mini-boom in international movies shooting in Japan, but these are mostly done with crews that come into Japan for the duration of the shoot.

FOREIGNERS WORKING IN THE FILM INDUSTRY IN JAPAN

The handful of foreigners working in the film industry here are doing the following kinds of work:

Directors: very few (maybe only two who are based here.)

DOP'S – one or two that I know of, mostly shooting foreign TV or commercials.

Commercials companies – one very established one, also handling Line Producing for Hollywood films that shoot here.

Co-ordinators – a handful, some of them working regularly.

AD's – two or three bilingual AD's, mostly based outside Japan.

Critics/Writers – a few, working for the trade journals and as critics and academic writers.

Film Educators/writers – several very active people.

Sales – one or two people, who specialize in Japanese or Asian cinema, based outside Japan.

Acquisitions and Agents – a couple, one based in Japan full time.

Producers – at least one ex-Jet, now a producer in the UK with a particular interest in Japanese projects.

Marketing – a few people working in the marketing departments of the American majors here.

Translators/Subtitlers – several people making careers out of this.

Other – there are several companies and individuals making a living by doing in-house promotional videos.

This is not an exhaustive list – it is really just a list of the foreigners I have met working in the industry here. Since the film industry is very global it would make more sense to get the skills to work in the industry in your own country and if you also speak Japanese to apply these skills later in Japan, but it would not be impossible to work one's way up from the bottom in Japan, though visa issues are always difficult. No production or distribution company is likely to employ a foreigner unless they have skills already.

WAYS INTO THE INDUSTRY

For people who want to work in the creative side of the film industry the fastest way is probably still to go to film school, though they must bear in mind that over 90% of the people who go to film school to become directors never actually direct a feature film.

There is lots of work around film festivals that can lead to jobs in the industry – because you meet a lot of people at festivals this is a good place to start a career if you are young – you can network at festivals and get involved with promotion and with producing.

There are many organizations that support film all over the world and a lot of work involved with these organizations. This puts you more on an administrative track.

Through working one's way up as a PA (Production Assistant) to Production Manager or AD you can get a foothold in the industry that could lead to a producing career.

Good writers are always in demand, but there are thousands of people writing screenplays and few good scripts. If you have written a good script it may be a good idea to get an agent.

There are not enough entertainment lawyers in Japan, so this could be a growth area.

There is always a demand for business people who are willing to apply their skills to the world of film and work with creative producers, but many become frustrated by the risky side of the business and leave. MBA's for Producers are starting up now. The Cass Business School is planning to start a branch in Shanghai.

WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE WORK IN THE FILM INDUSTRY

Most people who continue to work in the business for many years do so because they really love films. Most people in the business are not particularly successful and the everyday struggle leads to a high drop-out rate.

We recently employed someone from New Zealand, who is a good model for someone aiming to enter the industry. He has a number of skills: Japanese, two years of law school, three years of film school and two years of graduate film school, experience in producing shorts, music videos and commercials as well as working on large foreign and domestic feature films, television programs and commercials, an analytic mind, a background in script-reading and story analysis, a calm and non-egocentric approach to working with other people, a sense of business and a sense of humor.

So, for JETs wanting to enter the film business, I would suggest that they acquire a number of skills and a lot of concrete experience, that they really think about exactly what role they want in the film business, and that they also question their motives. Many people think it is glamorous and exciting but the risk and the stress outweigh the glamour and without talent, commitment to film itself or a real strong business sense, people are not likely to find satisfaction in the film business.