

*Japan may look very different but little of substance has changed*

You might remember the movie *Kenny* and its longhaired, bearded Quebec-born director, but the name Claude Gagnon will be much more familiar to the Japanese. He scored his first major success with *Keiko* in 1979, which he shot in Japan, and was the movie that brought him international fame and established his enduring links with this country. Among his many later works, one need only cite *Kamataki*, as well as his latest movie, *Karakara*, filmed entirely on Okinawa, which tells the interlinked stories of a retired intellectual from Quebec on a spiritual quest to the island and of a Japanese girl with a complex family history. The film has been a huge hit since its release here in January and has already won plaudits and prizes. While he was in Tokyo, Claude Gagnon accepted JQR's invitation to explain his love affair with Japan.

Time was, if you were a 20-year-old Québécois intellectual, you went to France. But I never wanted to do the same as everyone else. I wanted to find the country that was the most removed from my own experience, be it culturally, religiously, philosophically, or geographically.

In the sixties, I left the séminaire (Catholic high school in Quebec) where I was studying the cours classique (classical

else to sleep really didn't match up to anything I'd ever read. You might have read Sartre and Camus, and you might think you know it all, and then you get out into the real world. Everything that I thought I knew about Americans was either wrong or only partially true. In the Deep South, a pickup truck stopped to give me a lift. The driver was a real man wearing a cowboy hat and packing a rifle. He looked askance at my beard and the hair that I wore fashionably long. Still I was lucky because I was a sportsman and a big American football fan, and when he asked me about a Texan player in the Canadian League, I immediately replied, "Oh, he's my favorite!" He was a little mollified. He dropped me off at a barber's and gave me a few bucks so I could get a haircut! I went up onto the barber's porch but I hid until my benefactor had driven off! I just wanted to explain how this experience completely changed my perception of how we see other people and of how other people see us.

#### **I like to smash social expectations**

A beautiful woman is well aware of how people see her: she knows that when she goes somewhere, people are going to stare at her. In my movies, I like to dwell on physical appearance. When I was younger, I played hockey but I was considered an intellectual because I went to the séminaire. But when I was at the

Interview

## Film director, Claude Gagnon

Photo / Yosuke Suga Texte / JQR

humanities curriculum) to make movies. Then in 1968, wanting to discover the world outside books, I hitchhiked to Mexico to visit the country during the Olympics. Strangely, it was during that trip that I realized that I knew next to nothing about the U.S.A. What I did know about it was what I'd read in books. At the age of 18 meeting a black guy who takes you to the other end of a bridge and gives you \$5 out of charity after you've spent the night in a prison cell because you didn't have anywhere

séminaire, people thought of me as a "jock" because I was good at sports. I've always been struck by how much the image we project shapes other people's perceptions of us. I made one of my first films, *Larose, Pierrot et la Luce*, with Richard Niquette. I'd known "Ritchie" for years. He was a short fat kid, who wore suspenders, had rounded shoulders, and who at the age of 13 looked 50! while I was the college jock. I was a bit of a wild child, and I think that people were a bit scared of me. Later, while I was on a visit

to Quebec from Japan. Richard surprised me by asking, "Would you get mad if I told you I was gay?" He'd always thought that because of the way I looked, I must be a homophobe. We classify people and measure their open-mindedness by the way they look. This realization has had a major impact on my movies. When I cast a part, I put a lot of weight on first impressions, and then I like to smash social expectations.

#### Japan was perfect for me

It was after I'd finished traveling that I knew I wanted to make movies. I needed to know a bit more about people and not just from books but also from real life—to meet them and find out about their daily lives. It was then that I decided that Japan was probably the best place for me: an island, mountains... Canada is a new country but Japan is thousands of years old, and being here it really helped me to find myself. I first came here in the seventies. My original plan

was to spend six months in Japan, and then to go to Indonesia before heading to Europe. I thought I'd do my little trip like everyone else did in those days. But after six months I still didn't understand a thing. There were very few foreigners living in Japan in those days, and I remember that if you saw a Westerner in Kyoto, you'd crossed the road to say hi and trade phone numbers. It was the era of "Peace and Love"—euphoric and stimulating.

When I'm not on a movie set, I'm actually quite shy. Even going to buy something at a store makes me feel a bit uncomfortable, so I really liked the shyness of the Japanese. And I'd come face to face with an ancient culture, of which I knew nothing at all. But rather than being frustrated, I found it very stimulating. It made me question my own experiences, find new ways of thinking, and develop new aesthetic sensibilities. Then after Keiko became a hit, I began to feel I was beginning

to become bogged down and that I was becoming too comfortable. I had two kids, and my life was settling down to a dull family routine. Professionally, I was suddenly getting a lot of offers, but to make another Keiko—to go back over something in which I was no longer interested. I began to panic and thought about going back to Quebec.

#### My biggest shock: Fukushima

Today's Japan looks different from what it was in those days, but I find the changes are really quite superficial. It may appear to be spectacularly different, but when you start digging, you find it hasn't changed that much. Even among the young, I'm often surprised that it's still the group mentality that dominates—because it's so reassuring.

I've never thought that there is any country that is better than any other. I always tell people that everyone should go and spend a minimum of one year overseas, no matter where. It's vital to experience something different. From this perspective, there are many things that I love about Japan, and many others that I like a lot less. It's hard to be an individual in Japanese society. And the individual is badly prepared to go through life smoothly.

What saddens me most—the biggest shock that I've experienced during my stay here and the thing that has affected me the most—is Fukushima. On the one hand, I'm bitterly disappointed by the politicians, who lie, who'll say anything to people—that really makes me sad. And then again, it's also the lack of reaction among the people themselves. Abroad, when politicians abuse their power, people react. That's what democracy's for—to change governments. When a politician is in favor of nuclear power, and he's elected not just once but twice—I'm not much into politics as a rule—but that's something that I find really appalling. If they open new nuclear power plants, I'm leaving. Even in Okinawa, which is a long way from the closest plant, I won't stand for it. I'm outraged by the "lack of balls" shown by ordinary people, and how the elites are able to control them so easily—with TEPCO using its influence with the TV stations and splashing its money around. People are too frightened to say: "We don't care about the money. Let's get them!" That's why Japan hasn't really changed.

#### It's otherness that stimulates me

At the same time, I don't want to be too negative because Japan is such a paradoxical country that I find so very stimulating. I'm often confronted by something that at first sight makes no sense whatsoever, but when it's put in the right context, it immediately makes sense. That's why I always warn foreigners coming here for the first time not to make any hasty judgments. You must never judge a culture you don't understand. And it was because I was constantly stimulated by new discoveries that my six months stay turned into several years.

I make what I call "mirror movies": They reflect society without passing judgment on it. It's up to you to decide whether what I'm showing you is true to life, and whether you like it or not. All my films are based on this type of constant questioning. I've spent my life asking myself who I am, and why I am doing the things I'm doing. I'm particularly drawn to human weakness. We all have our weaknesses, no matter how strong we are. I'm more interested in the strong than the weak, but what I'm interested in the most are the weaknesses of strong people, the reasons—X, Y, or Z—that make them break down, mess up, or fall apart. Seeing my life through the lens of Japanese society allows me constantly to ask who I am, about my daily life, and what I choose to do.

#### Karakara = don't take yourself seriously

I've always really hated people who abuse their strength, and that's where I got the idea for Karakara. I didn't want to make a film about violence but I wanted to include it in a movie. And then I had a flashback about Gabriel, an intellectual who reminded me of all the intellectuals who come to Japan to "find themselves." When I was newly arrived, I had a "Zen" roommate who boasted that he hadn't had sex in six months and assured me that he'd never need to have it again as long as he lived... he was 23 years old!! He was always making snide comments when I brought girlfriends home, but one night, when I was asleep on my side of the shoji (sliding paper partition), I was woken up by screams and moans coming from the other side!! The scene from my movie doesn't really compare to that night! I found it so comical that I've always wanted to work it into one of my films. I tried to use it in an earlier movie but it didn't work but it was perfect for Karakara. You must never take yourself too seriously. You can meditate and stay



as fit as you like but you also have to be able to appreciate the good things in life!

#### Shooting a movie in Japan is extraordinary

Making a film in Japan is really extraordinary. The biggest advantage is that though people hesitate a lot before they commit, once they do, it becomes a matter of life and death for them. For me this team mentality is really great. Even if they're not 100 percent sold on something, they'll do it. The fact that there are no unions here removes a major cause of stress. These days, directors don't abuse their crew on set. When everyone is too tired, they stop. So I don't see the point of having unions in the film industry. In Quebec, for example, it's the employees who abuse their working conditions—counting every minute taken from meal breaks as

overtime—just to make more money. It's really disappointing for a director when an actor can't do a scene in one take, and you have to give him or her extra time to get it right. That's what is killing cinema! Here, in contrast, people complain that my working days are too short! But I want to give the job 100 percent; if I can only give 98 percent, I call it a day.

#### PROFILE

Born in Quebec in 1949, Claude Gagnon had made many world-famous movies, including Keiko, Kenny, and the newly released Karakara. He first came to Japan in the seventies and has been a regular visitor ever since. He is currently in Okinawa where he is already planning his next international movie projects.

