

Made in Japan - 2

by J. Mykell Collinz

My motivation as a filmmaker for traveling to Japan was economic and opportunistic. American military occupation had accelerated westernization and, when Japan regained its sovereignty in 1952, their economy was rapidly expanding. Led by manufacturing and export of items like cars, cameras, and transistor radios, their products were innovative and competitively priced.

By the time I arrived in 1958, Japan had reestablished its international role as an economic and political power. Living standards were generally high in terms of food, cleanliness, and quality of life. Yet the cost of living was significantly less than in the States. I had sufficient financial backing for my filmmaking ventures but I needed to spend wisely and generate marketable product.

I knew very little about Japanese history or traditional culture. Jingū laughed at my naïveté. "You should learn about country before going," she said. She was right, of course, but I'm impulsive. When the idea entered my mind, I acted without thinking of the consequences, as though the impulse came to me directly from God. Her appearance at the bulletin board in the marketplace validated my expectations of divine involvement. Without her, I was an unwanted visitor in a very competitive society. I didn't even speak their language. She immediately recognized the fortuitous nature of our encounter and, with a surprised expression, she said: "You have money? You can pay actors?"

"I can pay," I replied: "Although I'm not sure of the legal requirements, what licenses and permits I'll need as a non-Japanese to be an employer."

She smiled, and said: "We can do."

My heart filled with joy as I looked into her face, the face of an Asian goddess, a goddess who had been waiting for my arrival to actualize her full potential. Perhaps an objective observer would not agree with this assessment but I embraced it as my guiding metaphor.

Her face, at once average and beautiful, was round and symmetrical, with large, dark eyes perfectly spaced above well proportioned nose, cheek bones, and lips. Her light skin, smooth and clear, had a youthful glow. Yet her movements and gestures expressed a calculated confidence, demonstrating a maturity that belied her age.

She wore a long gray dress with a matching coat and hat, a popular outfit with women at the marketplace, one of few variations I noticed there.

I couldn't determine her shape because of the clothing. I wanted to reach down, put my arms around her, and squeeze her body next to mine.

Our eyes met as she looked up. Deliberately pronouncing the words slowly, she said: "Where are you staying?"

"I'm looking for a place," I replied: "What would you suggest?"

She had a ready plan, including a studio location and sites for shooting scenes. It's an idea she had been working on for several years. She believed, if she persevered, she could build a film company employing talent from the emerging Japanese avant-garde subculture. However, as with avant-garde subcultures everywhere, money was in short supply.

I followed her through the city to a neighborhood with traditional architecture and landscaping. The human-scale dimensions of low, unpainted buildings and houses made of natural materials surrounded by gardens and narrow pathways created an otherworldly atmosphere.

Jingū rang the bell at a gate in a wall enclosure made of wood. An elderly woman in traditional dress opened the gate and, after greeting Jingū with a smile and a nod, the woman looked in my direction with a startled expression, as though she didn't believe I was actually there.

The large secluded area behind the enclosure had a strolling garden in the middle which included a pond, a bridge, a rock lantern, and a variety of exotic plants. Around the periphery at slight elevations above the central garden, four traditionally constructed one story

buildings were equally spaced. Three of the buildings were for housing. The remaining building had separate areas for dining and cooking, bathing and toilet. It was the only building with running water from the local treatment facility. None of the structures had built-in heating or electricity.

"We can rent," Jingū said as we walked from the front gate where we entered and strolled through the garden.

The traditionally constructed buildings had shoji doors, windows, and room dividers along with tatami flooring. The thick tatami mats, which were stuffed with a variety of dried plant straw, also contained Japanese spruce wood chips, creating a subtle, pleasant aroma, along with preventing bugs from inhabiting the flooring.

After exiting the walled compound, I followed Jingū a short distance along the narrow street outside until we came to a large, wooden, two story building, and she said: "Here can be studio."

"Why is so much of this area available for rent?" I said as we entered the empty warehouse building.

"People live here are old," she said: "Maybe artist or musician. Japanese people want new."

Jingū contacted the property owners to make rental proposals. To simplify the procedure, she headed our new company and I became her American employee. It wasn't exactly legal, and the transfer of money required a convoluted series of contracts, yet the risk seemed acceptable, at the time.

