

Made in Japan

by J. Mykell Collinz

It was in the spring of 1958 when I first arrived in Kobe, Japan, traveling aboard a Norwegian merchant ship, looking to make movies on a limited budget. Superior quality cameras, lenses, and film were being produced in Japan at a fraction of the cost for similar products in America.

I sat at an outdoor restaurant adjacent to the bulletin board in the marketplace waiting for someone to read my posting. When a plainly dressed Japanese woman bent forward to read, I rushed over and said: "You speak English?"

"Of course," she replied, smiling politely: "How else to understand your note? You are wanting actors to make film. I am actor name, Jingū."

Jingū was a godsend. She worked tirelessly in front of the camera wearing costumes, wigs, and makeup, portraying a wide variety of characters. She also organized the other actors, the film crew, and arranged for filming locations with local authorities.

I needed a Japanese assistant to help me with scripts and directing so Jingū introduced me to Johnnie. He liked everything American and wanted to go to the USA. His knowledge of film history was astounding, including European as well as American and Japanese film. I eventually became his assistant, mostly just watching and paying the bills.

A limited market existed for Japanese art films, even in Japan. To keep the film company in business, we made an occasional 'pink film,' which usually sold very well domestically. Due to censorship laws, Japanese filmmakers were forced to avoid total nudity and, during love scenes, props were usually positioned to block the camera's view of banned body parts.

When I returned to the states on a marketing trip, I found little interest. The major film distribution industry in America was saturated with Hollywood's product. Art film distribution paid less and received fewer showings. I decided to go back to Japan and stay with that market. My decision was based on other factors besides business. I preferred living in Japan, I realized. I had become Japanese.

