



THE MAKING OF A JAPANESE

A film by Ema Ryan Yamazaki





LOGLINE

Intimately following 1st and 6th graders at a public elementary school in Tokyo, we observe kids learning the traits necessary to become part of Japanese society.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Tsukado, located in one of Tokyo's sprawling suburbs, is one of the largest public elementary schools in Japan with nearly 1,000 students. In the nation's unique educational system, children are tasked to run their own school in order to teach communal values and how to play one's role in the group. Intimately capturing one school year from the perspective of 1st and 6th graders, **THE MAKING OF A JAPANESE** has the magic of childhood with precious moments of joy, tears, and discovery — as they learn the traits necessary to become part of Japanese society.



LONG SYNOPSIS

In April, with cherry blossoms in full bloom, the new school year begins with an entrance ceremony for the incoming 1st graders. As classes start, free and unformed 1st graders face discipline and order as they have never before, learning how to line-up, care for their personal safety, clean their own school, and even serve one another lunch.



These 1st graders look at the 6th graders for aspiration. As the eldest grade, they take pride in displaying exemplary behavior for the school community at large, running the school's broadcasting department, replenishing hand soaps in sinks, and coming up with slogans to boost morale. In just a short six years, the 1st graders, who seem so small and clueless, will be in the 6th graders' shoes, with the values instilled a part of who they are.



Throughout the film, we hone in on a few 1st grade and 6th grade students and teachers who become our ensemble cast of characters. Shooting intimate verite with the children at their eye-level to create a larger-than-life effect and emphasize the wonder of life from their perspective, we are with them through the ups and downs of childhood.




For Japan, which must always be prepared for the next natural disaster, an essential part of early childhood education is learning about the limitations of life. During the monthly earthquake drills, the principal tells the students that the best way to prepare is to diligently care for their basic daily tasks – to align their shoes, to take care of their belongings, and to cooperate with one another.



As the school year progresses, the students are challenged by the system. A skipping rope routine for Sports Day is an opportunity for a 6th grade boy to break out of his shell; a music audition brings a 1st grade girl to tears. Teachers also face self-doubt and question how to go about educating the next generation, who seem different from themselves.



As cherry blossom buds appear once again, the 6th graders prepare to leave the nest of childhood. The 1st graders prepare to be 2nd graders, having taken their first immeasurable step towards the responsibility and discipline necessary to become members of Japanese society.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

As a mixed-race person growing up in Japan, I had many reservations about the Japanese way. In “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down” society, I was often that nail, and sometimes I felt suffocated by the rigid rules of society. When I was 19, I moved to New York to study film and begin my career as a documentary director. Unexpectedly, while I learned so many valuable things in America, I also gained a deeper appreciation for Japan – trains running on time, people patiently lining up, avoiding wastefulness, being considerate, and a sense of personal responsibility. These traits, learned from a young age, are so normal in Japan that they are taken for granted.

In recent years, there has been a rise in Japanese soft power, as the country has been recognized for its unique culture and respectable value system. This can be seen in Japanese fans receiving international praise for cleaning up trash after a World Cup soccer game, or a boom of Japanese-style minimalism around the world. It is my belief that the key to understanding how such traits are ingrained in so many Japanese, lies in elementary schools – a pre-school 5-year-old likely behaves as most 5-year-olds do around the world, but a post-elementary school 12-year-old distinctly embodies the distinct traits that form the basis of Japanese society.

But Japan is changing with the times, and so are the values of Japanese education. While perhaps a strict one-fits-all type of education contributed to the mass production of loyal salarymen that made possible Japan's economic miracle in the post-war era, the necessity to cater to individual needs and nurture unique talents has become an increasingly important subject of domestic debate. While Japan's collective strengths and harmony is often what the country is known for, the same traits can also act as a double-edge sword.

Still, Tsukado Elementary school is filled with hints for the future of humanity. While schools around the world were shut down for long periods amidst the roaring pandemic in 2020 and 2021, in Japan they reopened after just 3 months of closure in June 2020 with teachers, students, and parents committed to the daily sacrifices necessary to prevent widespread outbreaks. Around the world, as new challenges to humanity emerge in the 21st century, societies are reconsidering the balance between freedom and restraint. In this context, examining the inner workings of a Japanese elementary school demonstrates how being creative within constraints and putting the group's well-being above personal desires can pave the way for the next generation, and perhaps a better future for us all.

- Ema Ryan Yamazaki



EMA RYAN YAMAZAKI
Director/Editor

Raised in Osaka, Japan, by a Japanese mother and British father, Ema grew up navigating between Japanese and Western cultures. She uses her unique storytelling perspective as both an insider and outsider in Japan.

After graduating from New York University, she became the assistant to documentary mogul Sam Pollard, and began her career as an editor. She was Editor and Co-Producer for director Marc Levin's *CLASS DIVIDE*, which won the Grand Jury Prize at DOC NYC in 2015. She recently served as Editor and Co-producer of director Shiori Ito's *BLACK BOX DIARIES*, which premiered to critical acclaim at Sundance's World Cinema Doc Competition 2024.

Ema's first feature documentary, *MONKEY BUSINESS: THE ADVENTURES OF CURIOUS GEORGE'S CREATORS* (2017) was released worldwide by The Orchard, after raising over \$186,000 on Kickstarter. It premiered at the LA Film Festival and won the Audience Award at the Nantucket Film Festival.

Ema's second feature documentary about the phenomenon of high school baseball in Japan, *KOSHIEEN: JAPAN'S FIELD OF DREAMS* (2019), premiered at DOC NYC. The film aired in primetime on ESPN and was released theatrically in Japan. It later became a New York Times recommendation for international films to stream, and was featured on the Criterion Channel.

Filmography

CLASS DIVIDE (Editor/Co-Producer - Directed by Marc Levin, 2015)

MONKEY BUSINESS: THE ADVENTURES OF CURIOUS GEORGE'S CREATORS (Director/Producer/Editor, 2017)

KOSHIEEN: JAPAN'S FIELD OF DREAMS (Director/Editor, 2019)

THE MAKING OF A JAPANESE (Director/Editor, 2023)

BLACK BOX DIARIES (Editor/Co-Producer - Directed by Shiori Ito, 2024)





ERIC NYARI - Producer

Based in Tokyo and New York, Eric is President of Cineric Creative and International Representative for renowned film restoration house Cineric, Inc.

Eric has produced numerous films in Japan, including director Amir Naderi's CUT, which was the Opening Film of the 2011 Venice Film Festival's Orizzonti section. He produced MONTE, an Italy/USA/French co-production, which premiered at the 2016 Venice Film Festival with Naderi receiving the Glory to the Filmmaker Award. In documentary, he produced the critically acclaimed portrait RYUICHI SAKAMOTO: CODA, (Venice 2017) and companion concert film, RYUICHI SAKAMOTO: ASYNC LIVE AT THE PARK AVENUE ARMORY (Berlin 2018). Eric has managed 4K restorations of Japanese classics such as Kenji Mizoguchi's UGETSU with Martin Scorsese's Film Foundation, as well as Yasujiro Ozu's LATE SPRING.

In recent years, he has produced Yoichiro Okutani's ODORIKO, which won two awards at Cinema du Reel in 2021; Takeshi Fukunaga's AINU MOSIR, which was awarded a Special Jury Mention in Tribeca's International Narrative Competition in 2020, and Fukunaga's MOUNTAIN WOMAN (Tokyo International 2022); Ema Ryan Yamazaki's KOSHIEN: JAPAN'S FIELD OF DREAMS (DOC NYC 2019). He has recently served as a Producer on director Neo Sora's RYUICHI SAKAMOTO | OPUS, which premiered at the 2023 Venice and New York Film Festival, and Sora's upcoming narrative debut, EARTHQUAKE; Shiori Ito's self-documentary BLACK BOX DIARIES, which premiered to critical acclaim at Sundance 2024.



Filmography of Production Company - CINERIC CREATIVE (Selected)

- CUT (2011, Directed by Amir Naderi)
- AT ANY PRICE (2012, Directed by Ramin Bahrani)
- ODAYAKA (2012, Directed by Nobuteru Uchida)
- YOUNG BODIES HEAL QUICKLY (2014, Directed by Andrew T. Betzer)
- THE SHELL COLLECTOR (2016, Directed by Yoshifumi Tsubota)
- MONTE (2016, Directed by Amir Naderi)
- MONKEY BUSINESS: THE ADVENTURES OF CURIOUS GEORGE'S CREATORS (2017, Directed by Ema Ryan Yamazaki)
- RYUICHI SAKAMOTO: CODA (2017, Directed by Stephen Nomura Schible)
- RYUICHI SAKAMOTO: async LIVE AT THE PARK AVENUE (2018, Directed by Stephen Nomura Schible, 2018)
- KOSHIEN: JAPAN'S FIELD OF DREAMS (2019, Directed by Ema Ryan Yamazaki)
- AINU MOSIR (2020, Directed by Takeshi Fukunaga)
- ODORIKO (2020, Directed by Yoichiro Okutani)
- NUDE AT HEART (2021, Directed by Yoichiro Okutani)
- I WAS A SIMPLE MAN (2021, Directed by Christopher Makoto Yogi)
- MOUNTAIN WOMAN (2022, Directed by Takeshi Fukunaga)
- RYUICHI SAKAMOTO | OPUS (2023, Directed by Neo Sora)
- BLACK BOX DIARIES (2024, Directed by Shiori Ito)



MAIN CREDITS

DIRECTOR / EDITOR

EMA RYAN YAMAZAKI

PRODUCER

ERIC NYARI

CINEMATOGRAPHY

KAZUKI KAKURAI

SOUND RECORDING

TSUBASA IWAMA

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

SHIN YASUDA

AKIHIKO SUGIE

MIZUE KUNIZANE

CO-PRODUCERS

OUTI ROUSU

LUC MARTIN-GOUSSET

YUSAKU KANAGAWA

ORIGINAL SCORE

PÄIVI TAKALA

SOUND DESIGN AND MIX

ANDREW TRACY

CO-EDITORS

MARIKO IDE

MIZUKI TORIYA

ADDITIONAL CINEMATOGRAPHY

JOHN DONICA

COLORIST

FUMIRO SATO

TITLE DESIGN AND GRAPHICS

NAOKO SAITO

PRODUCTION DETAILS

Presented by CINERIC CREATIVE and NHK
in co-production with PYSTYMETSÄ and POINT DU JOUR
with the participation of YLE and FRANCE TÉLÉVISIONS

99 minutes • Japan/USA/Finland/France • 2023
In Japanese with English subtitles

WORLD SALES:

Autlook Filmsales

Salma Abdalla

welcome@autlookfilms.com

