

Revisiting *Live Your Dream* and *Cocktail Party*

AN INTERVIEW WITH FILMMAKER REGGE LIFE

Regge Life is the founder of Global Film Network Inc. Early in his career, Life worked as an American Film Institute intern on John Landis's Trading Places. He went on to direct episodes of Sesame Street, The Cosby Show, A Different World, and Sister, Sister. He is Executive Producer/Director for documentaries such as Doubles, After America . . . After Japan, Live Your Dream: The Taylor Anderson Story, and Cocktail Party. He produced his first work in Japan, Struggle and Success: The African-American Experience in Japan, in 1992. He has made several films on Japan and initially went to the country as a Creative Artist's Fellow with the Japan/US Friendship Commission and Bunka-chō. Life has additionally worked on television programs such as CBS News' Saturday Night with Connie Chung and NBC's Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow, and is the recipient of many awards, including four CINE Golden Eagles. He was honored by the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame and chosen a Sony Innovator in 1991.



In the brief interview that follows, Regge Life discusses two of his Japan-related films, *Live Your Dream: The Taylor Anderson Story* (2012) and *Cocktail Party* (2016). Both films received highly favorable EAA reviews and are strongly recommended for teachers and students. Here are a couple of excerpts from the reviewer of both documentaries, David Huebner:

Nearly 20,000 lives were lost in the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami on March 11, 2011. With such devastating losses, including over US \$500 billion in property destruction, it is a challenge to sort out numerous tributes to the many lives lost. However, Live Your Dream: The Taylor Anderson Story stands out as personal, reflective, honest, and richly filled with a sense of hope. —Education About Asia 18, no. 2, fall 2013

Cocktail Party (based upon Tatsuhiro Oshiro's novel by the same name) features superb acting, an intriguing plot, and an informative portrayal of the social conditions on Okinawa that have complicated US and Japanese relations for decades. A documentary of the Okinawa problem may not have the personal and emotional impact this film has on the viewer.

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Readers may read both EAA film reviews in our archives at <https://tinyurl.com/4ya73ds5> and <https://tinyurl.com/3s2b4twd>. Educators interested in purchasing either or both films may visit www.thetaylorandersonstory.com or www.cocktailpartythemovie.com. For Life's earlier films on Japan, please email globalfilmnt@earthlink.net or visit <http://globalfilmnetwork.net/films.html>. You may view a recent short film made by him, *Memories of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and Best Wishes for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics*, on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/25sm3x76>.

Lucien Ellington: *Regge, your film credits and cinema experience transcend Japan, but our readers would be especially interested in knowing a bit about your early life, what stimulated your interest in Japan, and brief depictions of the three earlier Japan films you created that are also available.*

Regge Life: Thank you for this question, Lucien. I was first attracted to the cinema of Japan when I was in graduate school at NYU. I was pursuing an MFA in directing, and so I was able to construct a program of study that allowed me to take classes in both the theater and film departments. I have been asked this question before: "What was the first Japanese film you saw?" and truthfully, I cannot remember. But what I do remember is going to the Elgin Theater, a revival house that used to be at Eighteenth Street and Eighth Avenue. They would pick a famous international filmmaker and do a full day of their movies from morning into the night. It was there that I watched early Kurosawa films, Naruse, Kinoshita, Mizoguchi, and of course Ozu. Their various styles of storytelling intrigued me. I was also fascinated by the way they moved the camera with the action that was so powerful and compelling,

which I later found out had influenced the French new wave filmmaking. Still many years would pass before I could revisit these early cinematic influences as I prepared to go to Japan for the first time. In 1990, I observed the making of *Tora San #43* as a Creative Artist Fellow, which was a partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts and Bunka-cho. During my time with *Yamada-gumi*, the term used to describe the creative team behind *Tora San*, I also witnessed the final seasonal filming for *Musuko* in the city of Hachinohe.

When my six-month fellowship came to an end, I began to debrief my total experience in Japan. As an African-American, it was a profound awakening. You see, I had decided to visit Japan during a time when extremely insensitive comments had been spoken by high officials in Japan, so friends understanding my creative inclinations but fearing for my safety urged me to turn down the fellowship. At the end of the six months, my experiences in Japan turned out to be completely opposite of what my friends feared, and speaking with other African-Americans who had made Japan their home at that time prompted my first documentary, *Struggle and Success: The African-American Experience in Japan*. The response to the film was very positive, and so about three years later, on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of World War II, I began a second documentary: *Doubles: Japan and America's Intercultural Children*, which chronicles the experience of children born of Japanese and American parents from the Meiji Era to the present day. I later completed a third film, *After America . . . After Japan*, that documented the returnee experience as the collapse of Japan's bubble economy led to many Japanese and Americans returning "home" after a long sojourn. In many respects, at this same time, I too was returning back to America on a full-time basis. Without planning it, I had spent most of the 1990s living and working in Japan.

Lucien: *What were the circumstances that resulted in you learning about and deciding to make a documentary about the late Taylor Anderson?*

Regge: In 2011, I was teaching at Howard University and completing a documentary on the 2010 earthquake in Haiti titled *Reason to Hope*. We were in the final stages of completion when I returned home on the night of March 10 to find my wife watching coverage of the disaster on NHK. We both sat in total disbelief witnessing the destruction, and we could only imagine the loss of life. In the days that followed, as I continued to monitor the situation, Taylor Anderson's name emerged. American media was following her story as one of the Americans who was missing. Taylor was serving as a JET teacher in Ishinomaki. When Taylor was finally found and it was confirmed she had not survived, within the Japan-focused community in the US, I began to hear stories about Taylor and the profound impact she had made in the city of Ishinomaki. JETS stand out no matter where they are assigned in Japan, but it was clear Taylor had cemented a relationship with her schools and community. Paige Cottingham Streater, executive director of the Japan/US Friendship Commission, is a longtime friend and a former JET herself, so



The March 2011 Tōhoku triple disaster. The statement indicates 15,882 people were killed with 2,668 missing. Source: Screen capture from *Live Your Dream: The Taylor Anderson Story*.



Taylor Anderson at Inai Yochien February 7, 2011. Photo by Kanata Abe. Source: Screen capture from *Live Your Dream: The Taylor Anderson Story*.

we were in contact. I shared with her how moved I was about Taylor's story and asked her to pass on a message to the family to share my condolences when the time was right.

Time passed and one day I opened my email to discover a message from Taylor's dad, Andy Anderson. That initial email began a communication between us. He shared stories about Taylor, and it was at this time I learned that another American, Monty Dickson, was also lost during the tsunami that followed the earthquake. Months passed of email communication, but in the fall of 2011, I was planning a return to Japan to continue development of a feature film. I wanted to visit Miyagi, to see with my own eyes how the area was rebuilding, and I asked Andy if he might introduce me to some of Taylor's friends in Ishinomaki and meet them if they were willing. Andy made the introductions, and I finalized my plans to travel to Tōhoku for part of my trip. Once I reached Ishinomaki, through the help of one of Taylor's colleagues, I witnessed the ongoing struggle of rebuilding. I also met with Taylor's JET colleagues. They were reserved at first, having spent so much time in front of cameras and reporters, but slowly they opened up when they realized my connection to Japan based on previous works. When I returned to the US, Andy and I agreed to finally meet in person at the family home in Midlothian, Virginia. On the day after Thanksgiving in 2011, I was graciously greeted by Andy, Jean—Taylor's mom—her brother, Jeff, and sister, Julz. It was during this face-to-face time that we decided to embark on a film, a film that became *Live Your Dream*, to remember not only Taylor, but Monty Dickson too.

Lucien: *In watching the documentary, I was hard pressed to remember a film that evoked such a variety of emotions, for me at least. Since you directly interacted with so many people who knew Taylor, a correct answer to this question is impossible, but in making the movie, please reminisce about two to three instances when, individuals in the documentary best captured the major themes of the film.*

Reggie: You are right; this is a very hard question to answer because, as you know, when you edit a documentary, so many things you wish you could include that amplify the major themes of the film you cannot because of time. To "live your dream," as Taylor was doing in Ishinomaki and planning to continue to do had she not perished, was something I found that everyone wanted to share in their interviews. Taylor's friend Katherine, or Kat as she was called, very powerfully remembered Taylor's way of looking at the world, a way that deeply impacted her. Taylor would not, as the expression goes, "sweat the small stuff." Taylor knew how to let go of all the negative stuff and move on. Many of Taylor's friends also spoke about this. Taylor was determined to "live her dream," and in living that way, she encouraged others to do the same. I was also very moved by Andy and Jean Anderson's testimony and their determination to keep Taylor's dream alive by continuing her mission to build a bridge between Japan and the US. The Taylor Anderson Memori-

al Foundation that they established continues this work. Probably the most profound interview is the story of Mr. Endo, a carpenter in Ishinomaki. He lost his three children in the tragedy, and having to face that reality, no one could ever fault him for wanting to give up on life. But because of Taylor's influence, he found a mission and turned tragedy into a new beginning by constructing bookshelves to house books donated in Taylor's memory. There are so many! There are reading corners in schools all over Miyagi and other parts of Tōhoku, with bookshelves made by Mr. Endo and dedicated to the memory of Taylor.

Lucien: *What circumstances attracted your attention to the novel *Cocktail Party* and in turn caused you to make this film?*

Reggie: In 2002, I was awarded a Fulbright Journalist Fellowship to conduct research in Okinawa on what I titled at that time the *Will of the People*. Okinawa had captured my curiosity in the closing weeks of my Creative Artist Fellowship, so I took a trip there to do scuba diving. Little did I know at that time the seeds that were being planted. Arriving in Naha on my fellowship, I was able to set up interviews with many prominent Okinawans, including the late Governor Ōta. My academic home was the University of the Ryūkyūs, and Katsunori Yamazato was part of the faculty there at that time; he introduced me to the work of Tatsuhiro Oshiro and his Akutagawa Prize-winning novella *Cocktail Party*. It was one of the stories in a collection titled, "Southern Exposure" and to me, the one story that so accurately captured the complicated relationship of the US Military and the Okinawan people.

Professor Yamazato arranged a meeting between me and Ōshiro-sensei, and after that initial meeting, we forged an agreement to work together to develop his original story into a work for the screen. One of the issues I was very adamant about was creating a contemporary story inspired by the novella. I felt this was very important because many people I encountered on mainland Japan regarded the problems in Okinawa between the citizenry and the US military as a symbol of the past. Ōshiro and I worked tirelessly for many weeks, carefully constructing a contemporary story from portions of the novella, along with scenes on the US military base. Ōshiro-sensei was very meticulous about how my English would be translated into not just Japanese, but Okinawan-flavored Japanese, so my longtime translator and subtitle artist Tomoko Kojiro had a challenging time to please him. Once we had the screenplay in both English and Japanese, production occurred in fits and starts. For a while, I wasn't sure if I would be able to make the film. Following the adage that the only way to finish is to start, I began to film the scenes that happen on the military base on a soundstage, where we constructed the interior of a US Marine base. Sadly, scenes that were written as flashbacks to the late 1960s, when the novella was published, could not be captured due to the budget, but little by little, we captured the remainder of the contemporary story. When the film was completed, we did a few



The toast. Source: Screen capture from *Cocktail Party*.



Marines at attention. Source: Screen capture from *Cocktail Party*.

screenings in the US, but the premiere in Japan happened at the Okinawa International Film Festival in 2016. Fourteen years had passed since my research began, the film was completely sold out days before release, and the response from the Okinawan audience was overwhelmingly positive. We screened the film again at the Uchinanchu Festival the following year, and most recently, we did a limited release of the movie to honor Ōshiro-sensei, who passed on to the ancestors in 2020.

Lucien: *Cocktail Party*, in my opinion, is a good story, so good that spoiler alerts are not going to happen on my part. At the same time, the movie appears to almost have the quality of a documentary as well. I admit that after watching the movie for the first time, I learned of similar reactions from others who've seen the movie. How did you manage to get these kinds of responses from viewers?

Regge: Thank you for sharing the response you had after watching the movie. I suppose my work as a documentarian in Japan and the extensive research I conducted prior to making the film show up, even though it is a work of fiction based on many factual events. People who have followed the relationship between the Okinawan people and the US military all know about

the horrific rape incident in 1995 and other incidents that occurred in the years that followed. What is virtually unknown are the behind-the-scenes investigations conducted by the Okinawan police and the US military when these and other incidents occur. It is too easy to paint US servicemen and women with the same “they are all bad” brush, but that would be inaccurate. Because the deployment of US troops in Okinawa has lasted so long and lives and experiences have become interconnected, Okinawans and US military commanders stationed there find these incidents abhorrent. In my experience, both sides do their best to prevent incidents like this from happening. To represent the earnest views of both sides was not easy, and some people have criticized me for not being *Hantai* (anti-US military, antibase). But the situation in Okinawa is not that simple. Oshiro Tatsuhiro believed in the “absolute ethic.” Based on this thesis, everyone—whether an Okinawan or American—has to take responsibility for their actions, good and bad. Everyone has to acknowledge that there is a price to be paid with all decisions.

Lucien: *Cocktail Party* caused me to reflect upon contrasting perspectives, of Okinawan's, Japanese, and members of the US military, as well as to consider issues of race, ethnicity, and class, and empathize the uncertainties and ambiguities literally every character in the film experiences in their decisions. The movie seems powerful but not didactic and “preachy.” Any responses to this viewer's take?

Regge: I am honored that you picked up on the fact that the film is not didactic or preachy, which would have been the hallmark of an antibase movie. My intention and the intention of the cast and everyone who worked on the film was to find the humanity and the truth in each character. That is why I feel the film resonates with audiences. The characters in the film are not the archetypes of the “Okinawan problem” often portrayed by both the Japanese and US media in their coverage of Okinawa. The people in the film are the men and women of Okinawa, mainland Japan, and members of the armed forces based there. The interactions of these three communities and their interests are not simple and easy. Okinawa has recently become a very popular destination for mainland Japanese to live, but what many mainlanders find is that even though both communities are Japanese based on nationality and standard language, their cultures are very different. Add to this mix military base personnel on a tour of duty maybe for only eighteen months, and the many members of the US military who by marriage are now part of the fabric of society in Okinawa, with as the term implies, “Double” children. Creating a contemporary story, we wanted to introduce audiences to a more complicated and nuanced atmosphere in Okinawa, and I think based on screenings and audience response, we've been successful in our mission.

May 2022 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the return of Okinawa to Japan, so we are hoping more institutions will make *Cocktail Party* the movie and the original novella vital parts of the teaching surrounding this historic milestone, enabling students and educators to understand more about the ongoing situation of the people of Okinawa and the US military in Japan's southernmost islands.

Lucien: *Regge, thanks for the interview!* ■

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