

## EAA INTERVIEW

## JOHN WILLIAMS, DIRECTOR OF JAPANESE FILMS



John Williams. Photo by Taka Koike.

John Williams grew up in Wales and studied Languages at Cambridge University. After moving to Japan in 1988, he made a series of short films before attempting the full-length movie *Firefly Dreams* (*Ichiban Utsukushii Natsu*) in 2001. Filmed in Aichi prefecture in central Japan, the film was named Best Feature Film at the Hawai'i International Film Festival, and won awards at five other international film festivals. Williams is also Associate Professor at Sophia University in Tokyo, where he teaches courses in film production, film history, and screenwriting.

Naomi and Mrs. Koide  
©2000 100 Meter Films. Photo by Trevor Almeida.

**Tanner and Mason:** *Were you surprised by the critical success of Firefly Dreams?*

**John Williams:** Yes, very surprised. The film was made on a very modest budget with a largely non-professional cast, so the fact that it was well received and released in other countries was great for everyone involved.

**Tanner and Mason:** *By the way, the Japanese title translates as "The most beautiful summer." Why is the title so different between languages?*

**John Williams:** I wanted to use the word *hotaru* in the Japanese title, but there were two other "firefly" films that year, so the distributor asked us for another title. The Japanese title is ironic, since the central character's summer is far from happy in many ways, but it is a defining summer in her life, and for that reason the most beautiful one.

**Tanner and Mason:** *I've spoken to many Japanese people who were surprised or disbelieving that a foreign director could express a Japanese "feeling" or "spirit" so well. What do you think about this sentiment?*

**John Williams:** I personally don't believe in anything like a Japanese "feeling" or "spirit." I know there may be some kind of general aesthetic sensibility here, which is different from that of other countries, but on the other hand, there have been many different kinds of Japanese cinema, literature, and art. Is Ozu more Japanese than Naruse Mikio? Is Kurosawa more Japanese than Kitano Takeshi? I get into a lot of fights with people about this point of view—many people dislike the idea that Japan is not "other" in some way. I would be more frightened if it were.

**Tanner and Mason:** *Some people have told me your directional style reminds them of Ozu Yasujiro. Have you been strongly influenced by any Japanese directors?*

**John Williams:** Of course *Firefly Dreams* does pay conscious homage to certain aspects of Ozu's style, in particular his use of a

fixed camera, and his "pillow shots." The themes of the film are Ozu-esque too, I suppose—it's about family breakdown and inter-generational conflict. I love Ozu's films, but not because they have a "transcendental style," which I think is pure nonsense, but because Ozu's best films are funny and sad at the same time. I particularly love the film *Ohayō*, (*Good Morning*), which has extended jokes about farting in it. What's so transcendental about that? I love Shindō Kaneto's ghost films like *Black Cat from the Grove* and *Onibaba*, and also many of Naruse's films, but there isn't one director whose style I try to emulate. I like some recent Japanese cinema, but to be honest, the best Asian films I have seen recently have been from Korea; for example *Peppermint Candy*, *Oasis* and *Memories of Murder*. What I like about the good recent Korean cinema I have seen is that it combines solid scriptwriting and storytelling with social commentary. For example, a film like *Memories of Murder* can be enjoyed simply as an excellent serial killer thriller, but in fact it's much more than that—it's a comment on contemporary Korean history and a metaphorical film about gray morality, which in some ways reminds me of Kurosawa's *Nora Inu* (*Stray Dog*).

Elia Kazan said that for a film to be great it had to work on three levels: as story, as a societal piece, and as metaphor. Unfortunately, most recent Japanese cinema fails on all three counts. Part of the problem here is a kind of censorship by capitalism—films are just junk products for the teen audience, and most of the producers think only about profit and not about a quality film. Of course there are many exceptions, but those concerned with quality are the ones finding it hard to finance their films.

**Tanner and Mason:** *In a lecture in Nagoya, I heard you explain that you were moved by parts of Sarashina's Diary. Are there any other Japanese works or writers you are fond of?*

**John Williams:** I love that book, and for different reasons, *The Pillow Book*, which is really witty and entertaining. I also like the *Tale of*

*Ultimately it's a film about memory and identity, which relates to those topics within Japanese society today.*

*Heike*. I haven't read Japanese literature in a systematic way at all, but I like Akutagawa very much and more recently Murakami Haruki.

**Tanner and Mason:** *The main actresses in Firefly Dreams present many contrasts. While Ukai Maho (Naomi) is a relative newcomer to movies, Minami Yoshie (Mrs. Koide) is a veteran who has worked with Akira Kurosawa (she was a teacher in Ikiru in 1953). Did you handle them differently?*

**John Williams:** With Maho we rehearsed intensively. With Minami Yoshie it was really a question of finding the style of acting together and then letting her work with Maho. She was so accomplished, I really had little to say to her in terms of direction. In fact, I think I gave my worst direction ever to her in one scene: "Do it again like you did in Take 2." And she did.

**Tanner and Mason:** *While Firefly Dreams is entertaining and has some universal messages, what can students of Japanese language and culture pick up from the film?*

**John Williams:** Ultimately it's a film about memory and identity, which relates to those topics within Japanese society today. As such it falls into the same category as Koreeda Hirokazu's *Afterlife* and Shinozaki Makoto's *Not Forgotten*. I'm not claiming that *Firefly Dreams* is as good as those two excellent films, but it deals with the same topics. All three were made around the same time, and I hadn't seen the other two before finishing *Firefly Dreams*. I suppose all three directors were thinking that we were witnessing the death of the last generation in Japan to have experienced war, and wondering about what would happen in Japan because of that.

**Tanner and Mason:** *What do you think may happen?*

**John Williams:** I suppose that all concerned people here worry that forgetfulness about the war and history in general will lead to history repeating itself. Since the current government is so keen to undo the Peace Constitution, and young people have been alienated from politics by the propaganda of mass commercialism, I think this is a very grave danger.

**Tanner and Mason:** *Japan has a reputation for unwritten barriers to entry. Did you find that true in the film industry?*

**John Williams:** Every film industry has barriers. Becoming a film director here is probably no harder than anywhere else in the world. On the contrary, because there are so few foreign filmmakers here, I think doors open that wouldn't necessarily open to young Japanese directors. The Japanese film industry is tough, though, because there are few subsidies and the infrastructure is lacking for distribution. Many films get made that never get seen. There is a huge demand for "content" but little funding to make quality films, so a lot of poor-to-mediocre films get made. Sometimes when I see the shelf-loads of junk films in the DVD shops I want to leave, but I'm stubborn too, and have other projects that I want to make here, so that keeps me going.

**Tanner and Mason:** *You also wrote the script for Firefly Dreams. Can you describe the process from incubation to actualization?*

**John Williams:** I spent more than three years on the script in total.

Like everything I write, it took a long time and changed a lot over the years. The script also evolved very organically out of the location-hunting process. Once we found the location (Hōraichō) we visited it over several months, talking to local people and building relationships. Quite a lot of script changes came out of conversations I had or overheard. The aunt's speech about how the area has changed over the years was taken verbatim from the owner of the *ryokan* (Japanese inn) where we shot. Other parts were woven around Minami Yoshie's own memories of the war, and improvisations with the actors.



Scene from *Starfish Hotel*.  
©2005 100 Meter Films. Photo by Taka Koike.

Minami Yoshie's own memories of the war, and improvisations with the actors.

**Tanner and Mason:** *Tell us a little about your next movie, Starfish Hotel.*

**John Williams:** *Starfish Hotel* is a bigger budget film and very different from *Firefly Dreams*. It

blends film noir with Japanese ghost stories. It's an odd film—Donald Richie kindly came to a screening of the film and called it a "Japanese Gothic," which I think is accurate. People who liked *Firefly Dreams* may be surprised and perhaps even disappointed when they see it, but many of the themes are the same.

**Tanner and Mason:** *Can you tell us how you teach film production, film history, and screenwriting?*

**John Williams:** I teach a course in British cinema in which I try to do an overview of British society through film from the 40s to the present day, and the same with American cinema. My choices are quite canon-based, I suppose. In British cinema we move from David Lean through the "kitchen sink" period up to Loach, Leigh, and Winterbottom. In American cinema, we go from *It's a Wonderful Life* to *Do the Right Thing*.

In my film production class, the students are currently shooting a feature length horror film in digital video based on *Yotsuya Kaidan*. It's quite an ambitious project, and has taken three years to get to the shooting stage.

**Tanner and Mason:** *Good luck with your new projects, and thanks for your time. We look forward to seeing Starfish Hotel when it is released in Japan in January of 2007. ■*

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