

## “I think it was my life”

### Kuzui Kinshirō (Producer)

#### The Art Theatre Guild

MINIKOMI: What is the history behind the Art Theatre Guild?

KUZUI: The Art Theatre Guild (ATG) was founded in November 1961. The leading members were Kawakita Kashiko, and Kawakita Nagamasa from Tōwa, as well as several film critics who actively supported experimental and avant-garde cinema, and wanted to set up movie theatres that would show these films — out of these efforts, the Art Theatre Guild emerged. Initially, ATG consisted of ten repertory cinemas, mostly owned by Tōhō Studios who, like Tōwa, supported the project. The ATG cinemas opened in April 1962. I was put in charge of one of these cinemas, the Art Theatre Shinjuku Bunka after the founding of ATG in November 1961.

MINIKOMI: You were working for Sanwa Kōgyō at the time. What was the relationship between Sanwa Kōgyō, and Tōwa, Tōhō, and ATG?

KUZUI: The president of Sanwa Kōgyō, Iseki Taneo, was the first president of ATG. Sanwa Kōgyō contributed the Shinjuku Bunka cinema and my person, whereas Tōhō and Tōwa acted as the main financial sponsors and were cooperating on other levels with ATG. Sanwa Kōgyō was founded shortly after the end of the war and owned about a dozen cinemas, scattered all over Japan, but didn't act as a distributor. I started working for them in 1951, just after I graduated from University. I had worked in various cinemas and as the manager of the Shibaenkan

cinema before I was put in charge of the Shinjuku Bunka in 1961. When I took over the Shibaenkan, I had already gathered experience as the manager of another small cinema, where I was, among other things, responsible for programming — since this was a repertory cinema, I could more or less show whatever I wanted. I must admit that I wasn't particularly interested in the management of a cinema, and neither in film directing nor acting. What I found fascinating though was working as a starting producer, because you are responsible for budget and planning.

MINIKOMI: Can you tell me a bit more about the Shinjuku Bunka cinema?

KUZUI: The Shinjuku Bunka opened in the late 1920s, as a contract cinema of Tōhō Studios. During the war, they were screening mostly documentaries and educational films. After the war their programme policies changed a couple of times: At first, the programme consisted entirely of Tōhō productions, later on of films from Shintōhō studios, and after that it was a mixture of films from various production studios. When the idea of founding an association of arthouse cinemas emerged, Sanwa Kōgyō contributed just one cinema, the Shinjuku Bunka. When I started working for Sanwa Kōgyō in 1951, the Shinjuku Bunka was showing exclusively foreign films. In order to prepare the ground for ATG, we were screening only European arthouse films — or in any case no commercial blockbusters — during the six months prior to the re-opening in April 1962.

MINIKOMI: Why was the founding of the Art Theatre Guild so important?

KUZUI: At that time, Japanese cinemas offered only commercial films and pure entertainment. The import of foreign films was still heavily restricted. Only a certain number of films could be imported per year, and a quota regulation was in place that specified exactly how many foreign films each distributor would get. Accordingly, the majority of distributors preferred entertainment films that promised to be commercially successful. Films of artistic value were mostly left out and never found their way into Japanese movie theatres. The idea behind ATG was to open special arthouse cinemas in order to make these films accessible to the Japanese audience. During the first time, we got the films through Tōwa's import quota.

MINIKOMI: How would you describe ATG's role in the rapidly changing cinema landscape of the 1960s?

KUZUI: In the early 1960s, films like *Umberto D* by Vittorio de Sica or the films of Ingmar Bergman just didn't get released in Japanese cinemas – most of the films we considered important never got any attention. It was ATG's aim to show some of these amazing films in Japan. As opposed to regular cinemas which used to change programme every week, we had running times of at least a month. Screenings didn't start in the morning, as was standard practice at the time, but at 1 o'clock, 3 o'clock, 5 o'clock, and 7 o'clock in the afternoon. We had no standing room tickets, and visitors were not admitted during the screening. If someone was late, he or she was asked to wait for the next screening – it seemed important to us that the audience could concentrate on the film and watch the whole film sitting, and without interruption. The films were not always easy to digest, so we wanted to provide the best conditions possible for the audience to enjoy them. For us, another aim of ATG would be fulfilled if maybe, sometime, out of this audience a young filmmaker would emerge who could give a new direction to Japanese filmmaking.

### **ATG as distributor**

MINIKOMI: The films for the ATG cinemas were selected by a committee of film critics?

KUZUI: Yes, the selection board consisted of eight to ten critics. The members changed every two

to three years. Some of the initial members, such as Ogi Masahiro, Kusakabe Kyūshirō, and Iijima Tadashi, were already members of the Association for the Promotion of the Art Theatre Movement that was very much involved in the formation of the Art Theatre Guild.

MINIKOMI: Can you tell me more about the selection process?

KUZUI: There were so-called preview screenings for the customs clearance of imported films. In these screenings all the films were of course shown without subtitles, and usually several films in a row. The board members attended these screenings, picked out the most interesting films and discussed them in a meeting. Out of ten to twenty proposals one film was selected for ATG. In those early days the number of films to choose from was just enormous. At the beginning, there were so many films that we had screenings almost every day.

MINIKOMI: Were all these films imported through Tōwa? And was there any prior selection process?

KUZUI: Yes, at first the films came from Tōwa. I think that some board members stated their preferences. Some members regularly attended the big film festivals in Europe and saw films earlier than anyone else in Japan. And obviously the Kawakitas at Tōwa would make suggestions, too.

MINIKOMI: Who took the final decision about which films were shown? I could imagine that from time to time there were disagreements?

KUZUI: The films were selected by majority vote. Our very first film was *Matka Joanna od aniołów* ("Mother Joan of the Angels", 1961) by the Polish director Jerzy Kawalerowicz. Eight of the ten board members were convinced that ATG really had to show this film. In the first meeting, the board picked out altogether three films: Kawalerowicz's *Matka Joanna*, Jean Cocteau's *Le Testament d'Orphée* ("The Testament of Orpheus", 1960) and Ingmar Bergman's *Smultronstället* ("Wild Strawberries", 1957).

You see, in those early days, we had such a wide range of interesting films to choose from that it was easy for the board to agree on a couple of films, all of them were just masterpieces. Later on, however, the board members failed to agree sometimes – the number of interesting films went down, and after the quota system had been abolished and distribution was liberalised, a couple of commer-

cially oriented cinemas started to show arthouse films as well. Overall, the number of European films went down and cinemas were dominated by American productions. Some people argued that ATG should be showing American films as well, but others maintained that this wasn't ATG's mission, and that it was good if other cinemas took up American arthouse cinema.

MINIKOMI: Did ATG co-ordinate its activities with Tōwa, who was likewise acting as a distributor for European film?

KUZUI: Tōwa had a very specific programme and was actively supporting European cinema. Certain films, however, not even Tōwa could show – it would have been impossible to show, for example, Cocteau's *Le Testament d'Orphee* for a whole month in a regular cinema.

MINIKOMI: By introducing the Japanese audience to many of the masterpieces of film history, ATG created an interest in and awareness of world film history. What was the audience's initial reaction to these films?

KUZUI: There were quite a lot of young people and cineastes who were starved for this kind of films and just rushed to see them, but for the average audience most of the films were probably hard to digest. Moreover, the Shinjuku Bunka cinema had an atmosphere that was very unusual at the time and not immediately appealing to an average audience.

The cinema was completely refurbished before we opened in April 1962. Seats were ergonomically designed and much more comfortable than in other cinemas, and there was plenty of space between rows, so that people didn't have to get up if someone wanted to pass by. The walls in most cinemas at the time were decorated with film stills or painted film posters in garish colours. The Shinjuku Bunka had nothing of that sort, there was only one huge panel with an enlarged film still, otherwise the cinema was monochrome grey, without any colours. Some made fun of it by calling it "the mausoleum". We acquired a reputation for being a cinema that turns its back on its audience. Maybe it felt like that to some people, but there were many others who were hungry for something new and open to experiment, and just stormed the cinema. In those early days we were always full.

MINIKOMI: Was the idea from the very start to screen independent Japanese film as well?

KUZUI: It was one of the founding guidelines of ATG to show masterpieces from all over the world. Obviously, Japan is part of the world, so we were set upon having at least one Japanese film among our first four films. Teshigahara Hiroshi was just finishing his first feature film *Otoshiana* ("The Pitfall", 1962) at that time, so this was the third film we were showing, after *Le Testament d'Orphee*.

MINIKOMI: At the experimental film festival of Teshigahara's Sōgetsukai, there was an ATG award. You yourself have repeatedly shown experimental film at the Shinjuku Bunka. Can you tell me more about the connection between ATG and independent or experimental filmmakers?

KUZUI: That was essentially a matter of personal friendships and connections – between me and Teshigahara and other directors, or between members of the ATG board and certain filmmakers. There wasn't much exchange or co-operation on an official level, between ATG and official organisations or groups.

## The Shinjuku Bunka

MINIKOMI: I have frequently been told that ATG was actually Kuzui-san. What was your personal relationship with ATG?

KUZUI: As I have mentioned before, I wasn't employed by ATG, I was working for Sanwa Kogyō. I was never a member of ATG. However, since Iseki Taneo, my boss, was also the president of ATG, I was very much involved in ATG. The fact that I was never an employee of ATG made it easier for me to voice my opinion, and fortunately I had absolutely free reign in the management of the Shinjuku Bunka. I could stage theatre productions after the film screenings, and show experimental film in special night programmes, and had a lot of freedom in other respects as well. Essentially, I could realise all my projects and was free to do what I wanted. This gave the Shinjuku Bunka its characteristic outline and orientation, which by and by became the outline and orientation of ATG as such. Most of the other ATG cinemas bailed out after some time, but the Shinjuku Bunka was immensely successful.

MINIKOMI: Why did the other cinemas quit ATG?

KUZUI: Because it didn't work out financially for them. The cinemas in Kyōto, and Hokkaidō, and

even the cinema in Kōrakuen in Tōkyō couldn't attract the numbers of visitors the Shinjuku Bunka had. It wasn't possible to establish the Art Theatre system at these cinemas, maybe because they didn't have such a strong individual turn. After a very short time, only three of the initial ten cinemas remained. I could more or less do what I wanted, because Iseki Taneo trusted me. He had already given me free reign at the cinema I had managed before the Shinjuku Bunka, and it seems that he felt that he could rely on me. However, he never defended or actively supported me or my projects. He actually didn't take much interest in artistic matters or the filmmakers' concerns. On the other hand, I was careful not to embarrass him, since I knew that he trusted me unconditionally.

MINIKOMI: The Shinjuku Bunka wasn't only a cinema, but was used for theatre productions as well. In general, it seems as if you had been more interested in theatre than in film.

KUZUI: I always found free and experimental theatre very interesting. Well, we are easily fascinated by everything new. I know that a couple of filmmakers at the time claimed that I was more interested in theatre than in their work, but that's not true. Whenever I was working with film I thought how fascinating theatre is, and when I was working with theatre I thought that, after all, film is best. Theatre and film are fundamentally different. Films survive, whereas theatre is transient, ephemeral. Theatre productions may live on in the memory of the audience, but memory is deceptive, and quite often a production seems better in our memories than it really was. And of course there are many productions that haven't been documented and are therefore "lost".

Films, on the other hand, have something frightening, exactly because they survive. In my view, films shouldn't be watched on video, one has to watch them in the darkness of a cinema. It is the cinema, its specific atmosphere, the sounds, the breath of the visitors, which turn a film into an experience. That's what makes film so frightening.

MINIKOMI: The Shinjuku Bunka wasn't only the heart of ATG, it was – as the name already spells out – a centre of "Shinjuku culture". Can you tell me a bit about Shinjuku in the 1960s?

KUZUI: Shinjuku was like a live wire. After the demonstrations against the American-Japanese

Security Treaty in 1960 it was comparatively quiet until 1963–64, but from 1965 on it went full-tilt. Shinjuku was awash with political demonstrations, happenings and performances, street theatre, jazz clubs, cafes and bars. Young people poured into Shinjuku, and especially theatre and film people gathered there. They found a level of energy in Shinjuku that just wasn't there in Ginza, Shibuya or elsewhere.

## The Sasori-za

MINIKOMI: In 1967 the legendary underground theatre Sasori-za (Theatre Scorpio) opened in the basement of the Shinjuku Bunka. Apart from experimental theatre the programme of the Sasori-za regularly included screenings of experimental film. How did this come about?

KUZUI: Adachi Masao had just made an experimental film, *Sain* ("Sain", 1963), at the film club of Nihon University, and I had shown *Sain* in the first night roadshow at the Shinjuku Bunka. However, the screen of the Shinjuku Bunka was too big for the 16mm film, and due to this the projection was a bit blurred. I wanted another, smaller screen that would allow me to show 8 mm and 16 mm films in optimal quality.

I got the idea for the Sasori-za from the small theatres I saw in Paris and New York that accommodated around 100 people. I thought the basement of the Shinjuku Bunka cinema that was used as a storage room could be turned into a second, smaller movie theatre where theatre productions could be shown alongside films. I must admit that I don't particularly like the term "underground" (*angura*). There may be underground films, but I don't believe that there's anything like underground theatre. I prefer the term "off theatre", although I don't object to the term "underground cinema". The films of Andy Warhol or Kenneth Anger, for example, are clearly films that came from an underground culture and drew their strength from it.

At the time of the founding of the Sasori-za there were no other off theatres around, so we had a kind of monopoly. Apart from the Shinjuku Bunka there was only the street theatre in Shinjuku, all the others, like the Kinokuniya Theatre, emerged only later. There were hardly any jam sessions or late-night jazz gigs either, so at night crowds of people went to the Shinjuku Bunka to see the ATG films or theatre productions. Quite often all seats were sold

and we had to send people away, because we were booked out. Very different from today... now, you have lots of off-theatre spaces, and Tōkyō alone has about 200 theatre plays per month.

In general, cinemas closed at 9 p.m. and the only thing you got from time to time were all-night screenings with Yakuza films by Tōei. Late screenings from 9.30 p.m. until midnight were unheard of – we were the first to introduce late screenings on a regular basis.

Students, amateurs and emerging filmmakers had hardly any chance to show their films to a broad public. We took these films on and played them in special late-night screenings. In very short time, it became common knowledge that the admission fees of five nights at the Shinjuku Bunka would cover the major part of the production costs of a film – which were not that high, of course. In this way, a lot of very different films were produced.

MINIKOMI: Who was responsible for the programme of the Sasori-za? Was there a board that discussed and selected the productions, similar to ATG?

KUZUI: No, in the case of the Sasori-za I alone was responsible for the programming. I had no board or advisors, I decided everything by myself.

MINIKOMI: Would you say that the Sasori-za audience was different from the ATG audience?

KUZUI: Up to the mid-60s, a lot of people came almost every month to see the new ATG films at the Shinjuku Bunka. However, this began to change around 1966/67. Some people were dissatisfied with the film selection, they wanted to see films that had more of an experimental, avantgardistic edge. They were far more interested in the programme of the Sasori-za and considered the films more exciting than the ATG films. And actually, I did agree with them.

## ATG as producer

MINIKOMI: Around this time ATG started to act as a producer as well. How did this come about?

KUZUI: One factor was the liberalisation of film imports. After the quota regulation had been abolished, distribution fees were raised and imported films got more expensive. At the same time, the number of films we could choose from went down, because other cinemas began to show an interest

in arthouse cinema as well. A couple of new cinemas opened and played also arthouse films. Some of them, as for instance the Miyuki-za, were quite successful. In the end, less and less films were left for ATG. That's life.

MINIKOMI: So ATG decided to start producing its own films?

KUZUI: Well, that's a difficult topic. One could say that, in a way, I benefited from the misfortunes of others. Various theatre groups split up at the time – members pulled out and founded their own groups, and these new groups came to the Shinjuku Bunka because they needed a stage. At the same time, there was trouble with the production studios: They had sacked most of the filmmakers of the Japanese Nouvelle Vague, and some of the filmmakers had left of their own accord. These filmmakers continued to make films, but they were on their own, and distribution was difficult because they had no production studio. ATG acted as distributor for some of these films. In view of the dwindling numbers of stimulating foreign films and the rising fees for imported films, this was an interesting option for ATG. For me, it was a stroke of luck – ATG and the Shinjuku Bunka became a kind of art salon, a meeting point for filmmakers, critics, theatre people, and other artists. We sometimes had very inspiring discussions there, the young filmmakers didn't only come to watch the films, but also to talk about them and discuss them with others. Ōshima Nagisa and Shinoda Masahiro were regulars, and some filmmakers of the younger generation like Onchi Hideo and Sugawa Eizō also frequently dropped in. They were disparaging the studios and emulating Resnais.

MINIKOMI: Was ATG's decision to act as a producer triggered by any specific event?

KUZUI: Yes, it was Mishima Yukio's *Yūkoku* ("Patriotism" aka "The Rite of Love and Death", 1966) and Ōshima Nagisa's *Ninja bugeichō* ("Manual of Ninja Martial Arts", 1967). Mishima was a friend of mine, and he insisted that the film should be distributed by ATG. He wanted the film to be shown in an arthouse setting, not in an average cinema. Since the film was only 30 minutes long we decided to show it together with Buñuel's *Le journal d'une Femme de Chambre* ("Diary of a Chambermaid", 1964). *Yūkoku* became a huge success. A bit later, Ōshima finished his short film *Yunbogi no nikki* ("Yunbogi's Diary", 1965). *Yunbogi* was originally

a TV production, but Ōshima was eager to see the film released at the cinema as well and asked me for help. I decided to show *Yunbogi* for a week in our late-night screenings, and we scheduled talks with Ōshima after each screening in order to attract more visitors. Every night, we were completely booked out. After we realised that we could fill the cinema with a short film like *Yunbogi*, we began to think seriously about producing films. I was convinced that Japanese films playing at the ATG cinemas could be successful enough to cover at least their production costs, given that the production costs stayed within a certain range.

MINIKOMI: These films were the so-called 10-million-yen films?

KUZUI: Yes, we came up with the 10-million-yen budget by calculating the average sum we made through ticket sales and subtracting the expenses for film copies and advertising from this amount. A film that stayed within a production budget of 10 million yen might just cover its expenses, including copies and advertising.

MINIKOMI: The first film in which ATG is credited as producer was Imamura Shōhei's *Ningen jōhatsu* ("A Man Vanishes", 1967).

KUZUI: This was a co-production with Nihon Eiga Shinsha and initially not an ATG project. Someone approached ATG with the project, and if I remember correctly, ATG wasn't financially involved, but acted only as distributor as was the case with Teshigahara's *Otoshiana* and Kuroki's *Tobenai chinmoku* ("Silence has no Wings", 1966). I in any case wasn't involved in the project.

MINIKOMI: ATG's first independent film production was Ōshima's *Kōshikei* ("Dead by Hanging", 1968). Can you tell me about the relationship between ATG and Ōshima?

KUZUI: In a way, I initiated the project. I didn't want to make a film based on an already existing book, I wanted a new, original story and discussed various ideas with Ōshima, and his production company. Since our budget was limited to 10 million yen, we had to be as quick as possible in the production process and tried to be as thorough as possible in the conception and preparation stage. Our plan was that the film should have only one set, a very small team, and all the actors would get paid equal fees. Needless to say, we had to hand in a proposal that was then discussed by the selection

board. Usually, the board set up an interview with the filmmaker as well, and when the proposal was discussed in the board meeting later on, I was there to defend the project.

MINIKOMI: Can you say something about the guidelines for accepting or rejecting projects?

KUZUI: To be honest, I was mainly looking for film proposals by independent and freelance filmmakers. If filmmakers working for a studio decided that they wanted to realise their own ideas or difficult projects they should, in my view, convince their studio bosses to do that. I preferred to work with the filmmakers who were rejected by the studios because they were trying to explore new approaches. Our first productions were almost entirely with filmmakers who worked in this direction.

MINIKOMI: How many proposals were usually discussed in a board meeting?

KUZUI: During the first time, about five to six projects. We notified the filmmakers of our decision on the same day – it was never easy to tell someone that his project had been rejected. Sometimes projects were vetoed even though I was convinced that they would have been wonderful films and would have fitted the ATG programme perfectly. Sometimes, it happened that all proposals were rejected because the board members couldn't agree on any of them. In this case I told the filmmakers that they should try again at the next meeting, and helped them with the revision of their proposals.

MINIKOMI: How often did the board meetings take place?

KUZUI: When I had around five projects, I submitted them to the board, together with various materials and background information on the individual projects. The board consisted of only five members. I carefully explained every proposal and asked for their opinion. I always made sure not to discuss too many projects. At the same time, it didn't make sense to propose only "safe winners", since usually only one or two out of five projects would be selected. If ten proposals were submitted for the same meeting, I tried to convince some of the filmmakers to rewrite their projects. In general, projects by directors like Ōshima or Shinoda passed without any problems, because their proposals were very precise and professional, and naturally it helped that they were well-known figures. It was far more difficult for young and undistinguished filmmak-

ers. In this case, it helped if for example the screenplay writer was famous, or some other well-known figure was involved in the project.

MINIKOMI: What happened after a project was accepted by the board?

KUZUI: As a rule, the preparatory work would take about a year. During this time, we elaborated and fleshed out the film's subject matter and setting. Quite often the social or political background had changed during this preparatory year – I mean, it obviously made a difference whether a film came out in 1968 or 1972, especially when the political and social situation radically changed after 1970. We tried to be either ahead of our time, or to find “universal” topics, but it still happened that events outstripped us and projects had to be reworked before they were submitted to the board. Usually, the director and I worked together on the changes. Until we knew whether a project was selected by the board or not, the director and I shared the workload. Location hunting and scenario hunting started only after the board had officially accepted a project. The proposals as such consisted only of a short synopsis and treatment, so we spent a lot of time working on a good treatment. I usually worked on five projects at a time, and it happened sometimes that two projects were very similar to each other. That was an unpleasant situation for me, since I couldn't very well point that out to the directors.

MINIKOMI: Can you tell me something about the casting process?

KUZUI: In the early days we had an unwritten rule to cast young, unknown actors in the leading roles, and veteran actors in the supporting roles. This was due to our limited production budget: The leads had to be present at least 20 days, during the whole shooting, whereas we needed the supporting actors for only about five days. Accordingly, we tried to pick little-known actors or promising newcomers rather than stars for the leading roles. Quite a lot of famous actors and actresses were eager to play in ATG films, though. That made it a bit easier for us.

MINIKOMI: ATG was also famous for its advertising strategy. Hara Masato and Adachi Masao, among others, made trailers for ATG films.

KUZUI: Yes, if we had outstanding assistant directors, we often asked them to make the trailers. I was convinced that the trailer should be more daring and avantgardistic than the film itself. I

also wanted the posters and slogans for ATG films to stand out from the advertising for mainstream films. As a rule, Japanese film posters at the time were designed by anonymous designers, rather than artists or renowned illustrators. The poster designs were very bright and colourful, and film titles were invariably printed in red. ATG, on the other hand, worked with artists from various fields, and the ATG posters were often designed by renowned painters, graphic designers, or illustrators. In most cases, this was proposed by the directors or me, and not through ATG. Sometimes, when ATG came up with a poster design that I didn't like, I invited a designer or illustrator to design different posters for the Shinjuku Bunka. Hayashi Seiichi, for example, made a stunning ink painting on hand-made paper for Jissōji Akio's *Mandara* (“Mandala”, 1971), and Kuroki Seitarō designed a new poster for Kuroki Kazuo's *Ryōma ansatsu* (“The Assassination of Ryōma”, 1974). The posters got pinched regularly, but somehow I liked that because it seemed an indication of the enthusiasm of some of our visitors. You don't pinch a poster if you don't want it really badly. And they had no other option than nicking the posters, because we wouldn't have parted with them voluntarily.

Most times, either the directors or myself came up with the advertising slogans. We didn't like the ATG slogans, and it was important to us that not the names of the actors but the name of the director was most prominently displayed. After all it was his film, and we wanted to make that clear.

The ATG logo was designed by Itami Jūzō, by the way; we were screening Jūzō's short films at the Shinjuku Bunka. The Sasori-za logo was designed by Mishima Yukio – it refers to the zodiac sign of Scorpio, and at the same time the M stands for Mishima.

MINIKOMI: A lot of the early ATG films were shown at film festivals in the West. Who was responsible for selecting and dispatching the films?

KUZUI: Usually this was a joint decision by the director of the film in question, and Kawakita Kazuko and me. Kazuko was very helpful. She gave us a lot of support and invaluable advice. If we knew that we wanted to send a film to a festival, we tried from the beginning to find an English title and to prepare everything. However, it happened as well that films were invited to festivals that I didn't really want to show.

## Controversies and experiments

MINIKOMI: You mentioned earlier that some films were outstripped by time. I am thinking of Wakamatsu Kōji's controversial film *Tenshi no kōkotsu* ("Ecstasy of the Angels", 1972) that provoked fierce discussions. Most of the ATG films of the 1960s were very political, and in general political feelings were running high at the time. How would you describe the mood at that time?

KUZUI: There were a lot of demonstrations and riots going on between 1960 and 1970, Shinjuku was like a battlefield. I usually don't think of myself as a particularly political person, but I was captured and fascinated by the mood of these years. What was happening on the streets was actually far more radical than any films or theatre productions could ever be. This definitely had an impact on the ATG projects. Wakamatsu's film was too lucid in anticipating things that were about to happen. The Christmas-tree bombing the film envisions really did take place later on. The film was released only after that happened, though, shortly after the tragedy with the United Red Army. The film was clearly ahead of its time.

MINIKOMI: At the time, some people tried to brow-beat ATG into stopping the release of Wakamatsu's film. Who was behind that action?

KUZUI: Various sides were putting massive pressure on Sanwa Kōgyō: Tōhō, the police, and the Public Security, among others. In fact, I was the one they were aiming at, and I was repeatedly questioned by the police and the Public Security officers. The movie theatre's trade union and the local merchant's union likewise exerted pressure on us. In the end, all the other ATG cinemas gave in, and the Shinjuku Bunka was the only cinema to release the film. To me, it was clear that I had to show this film. I had given my word to the director and intended to keep my promise, cost what it may. We received some threats from right-wing groups, but as long as the audience wasn't in danger, I didn't care. I was just determined to show this film. I think that was my attitude with every film.

MINIKOMI: This wasn't the first time you came under pressure, right?

KUZUI: Yes. When the studio bosses of Nikkatsu fired Suzuki Seijun because they objected to his film *Koroshi no rakuin* ("Branded to Kill", 1967)

a Suzuki Seijun Joint Struggle Committee was formed to demand his re-employment and the right to screen his films which had been blocked by Nikkatsu. The Committee wanted to hold a protest rally at the Shinjuku Bunka and I supported the idea, but my superiors intervened. I was forced to cancel the rally, and some felt that I had betrayed them. But the whole thing was a problem between Suzuki, and the labour unions, on the one hand, and Nikkatsu on the other, rather than a political problem.

The uproar caused by Adachi Masao's *Sekigun-PFLP: sekai sensō sengen* ("Red Army/PFLP: Declaration of World War", 1970), though, was clearly politically motivated. I had shown Adachi's previous films at the Shinjuku Bunka and I wanted to show *Sekigun* as well, but the police put massive pressure on Sanwa Kōgyō to cancel the screening. Sanwa Kōgyō finally gave in and withdrew the film. I could have filed a protest note, but it was clear to me that this wouldn't change anything. To quit wasn't an option either, because the Shinjuku Bunka as such was at stake. If I had left in protest, they might very well have shut down the Shinjuku Bunka... it was considered a "dangerous pocket of resistance" anyway. The police and the movie theatre union piled on the pressure and I had some rather unpleasant experiences. While I was interrogated some notebooks of mine which contained remarks on Wakamatsu and Ninagawa Yukio disappeared from my office and later turned up at the police headquarters. It was downright harassment.

MINIKOMI: In the case of Adachi's Film you were forced to write a *hanseisho*, a statement of self-criticism. Did that change your relationship to Adachi or Wakamatsu, who produced the film?

KUZUI: No, we had a very good relationship and it wasn't affected by the *hanseisho*. I don't know why exactly Adachi asked me to write such a statement, but if it was only that, I'd have written as many statements as he wanted me to. I think he wanted to save his face, and perhaps mine as well. I had an agreement with Wakamatsu that if the film couldn't be shown at the Shinjuku Bunka we would talk to the owner of the Keiō Meigaza theatre and ask him to pitch in. We had a meeting with him and everything was settled. The poor guy had no idea what kind of film *Sekigun* was and what he let himself in for. In any case, we had found an alternative and the film could be screened. Some radicals proposed to set the Shinjuku Bunka on fire for bailing out, but



I didn't take them all too seriously. I was confident that nothing would happen. I trusted Adachi and Wakamatsu not to let it come to that.

MINIKOMI: Wakamatsu and Adachi had already established a reputation as radical filmmakers with their sexploitation films (*pink eiga*). The board had no objections when their joint project *Tenshi no kōkotsu* was proposed?

KUZUI: In this case, I prepared the ground for the project very carefully. I organised a couple of Wakamatsu specials at the Sasori-za and invited all the important press people. The screenings were very successful and Wakamatsu's films got a lot of press coverage. He was hailed as the charismatic king of sexploitation film. He had already attracted attention with his film *Kabe no naka no himegoto* ("Secret behind Walls") that caused a scandal at the Berlin Film Festival in 1965, but now he became a very well-known figure. I tried to put his mutinous attitude to good use, and submitted the project just at the right moment. The members of the board had of course heard about the tremendous success of our Wakamatsu/Adachi specials at the Sasori-za, even though none of them had ever seen a film by Wakamatsu or Adachi. Moreover, they knew that Ōshima Nagisa and others had worked with the pair of them. I myself would have preferred Adachi to direct the film. His *Gingakei* ("Galaxy", 1967) was our first screening at the Sasori-za, and I always hoped that one day he would direct a film for ATG. In my view, it would have been better for Wakamatsu to make his films independently, not with ATG. I wanted him to keep his defiant and rebellious attitude, even towards ATG, and I was worried that ATG might compromise his independence. But Wakamatsu himself was eager to make a film for ATG, and that's what happened...

MINIKOMI: You've mentioned earlier that it was difficult to convince the board of projects that had no "big names" in it. Still, in the early years, ATG produced quite a number of films with relatively unknown filmmakers, like Matsumoto Toshio, Jissōji Akio, or Terayama Shūji. These films were often very experimental and avant-garde. What was your personal attitude towards these films and the Japanese avant-garde in general?

KUZUI: To be honest, I preferred to work with unknown directors. Similarly, I liked young writers, who were just at the beginning of their career, better than established authors. I find it hard to

work with someone who has a completely different approach to things, however famous and brilliant he or she may be. But I usually could work very well with filmmakers who were into avant-garde film, here the chemistry was right and I had hardly ever any problems. Matsumoto Toshio for example, no doubt a controversial figure, was considered to be too complex, impenetrable, but I liked his work. Jissōji was seen as a TV director. The now famous Tahara Sōichirō was completely unknown at the time. I started to take an interest in his work after I had seen his TV documentary *Dokumento seishun* ("Report Adolescence"). Likewise, no one had ever heard of Tatsumura Jin, the director of *Kyaroru* ("Carol", 1974). At that time, there were hardly any established filmmakers in Japan who were willing and able to create something new and startling. So I preferred to work with no-names. It was that simple.

## The decline of ATG and the Shinjuku Bunka

MINIKOMI: The 1960s mark the beginning of the decline of Japanese cinema. But unlike the big studios, which were relying increasingly on proven formulas, ATG still produced a startling variety of films. However, it seems that from the 1970s on ATG was affected by the crisis as well. We can watch the films becoming increasingly conventional, and there were hardly any experimental or avant-garde projects any more after 1974.

KUZUI: I guess that my approach had its benefits but also its drawbacks. My conviction that we should work exclusively with original scripts meant, among other things, that we slowly run out of interesting ideas in the 1970s. Someone proposed that we should start working with existing plays or stories – we had done that already on occasion. Kuroki Kazuo's *Ryōma ansatsu*, for example, was based on a story by Takahashi Kazumi, even though we changed a lot in the adaptation. I was looking at Ōe Kenzaburō's work and discussed an adaptation of his *Miru mae ni tobu* ("Jump Before You Look") or *Memushiri kouchi* ("Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids") with Kuroki Kazuo and Higashi Yōichi, two projects that were never realized. In the end, Yoshida Kijū and I decided to make an adaptation of Ōe's *Man'en gannen no futtobōru* ("The Silent Cry") and we asked Betsuyaku Minoru, the most avant-garde of the playwrights of this gen-

eration, to work on the screenplay. The project had already passed the board, and I really, really wanted to make this film. But then the screenplay turned out to be useless – it had its dramaturgic qualities, but playwrights tend to focus too much on the last lines, before the curtain goes down. But a film just isn't a play and doesn't have acts and curtains, as a rule. Ōe was extremely unhappy with the screenplay, and in the end we just had to give up on the project.

I was looking for another suitable story and came across *Honjin satsujin jiken* (“Murder in Honjin Manor House”) by Yokomizo Seishi. His crime stories were bestsellers and extremely popular with middle school and high school students, and several of his novels had been made into films. I thought that we could benefit from Yokomizo's popularity. I asked Takabayashi Yōichi, who had a very peculiar and eerie visual language, whether he would like to direct an adaptation of the book. Then I met with Yokomizo himself, and he too liked the idea of an adaptation by ATG. The film was a huge success. The result was, unfortunately, that ATG started to focus almost entirely on book adaptations. That meant the collapse of everything ATG had stood for over the past years. I still think that ATG might have taken another course if we had been able to make *Manen gannen no futtobōru*.

Our next film was *Sādo* (“Third Base”, 1978) by Higashi Yōichi. By chance, I had come across the novel *Kugatsu no machi* (“A Town in September”) that had just received a young-writers award in the literary magazine *Ōru Yomimono*. I liked the story and started plotting how I might convince the board of an adaptation. I asked Terayama Shūji whether he would write the screenplay, and the board gave us the go-ahead. Unfortunately, the film version wasn't at all what Terayama and I had envisioned. Higashi had made a refreshing film for teenagers, but the film had lost the sting, the acuity of the original. I must admit that I wasn't even really pleased when the film was voted Best Film of the Year by the magazine *Kinema Junpō*. I would have been happier if the film had met with less unanimous approval and had been ranked only fourth or fifth.

MINIKOMI: We have talked about the way in which ATG changed its course in the 1970s. In your view, was this caused in part by a changing audience?

KUZUI: The Shinjuku Bunka had to close down in 1974, and with it the last of the ATG cinemas and

the most prominent venue for independent film was gone. It was clear to me that after Tōhō took over, the Shinjuku Bunka wouldn't remain an arthouse cinema. I considered quitting altogether but ATG asked me to continue working as a producer for them, and I worked as a free producer for ATG up to the 1980s. The audience numbers for our films dwindled because the films now had to be released in “regular” cinemas where they were often running for only two or three weeks. Even though we tried to ensure that the ATG films would be running for a month at least, the cinemas just took them off their programme if the films didn't draw enough visitors. Anyhow, there wasn't much left of a specific, unique ATG programme, it was just all over the place. Sometimes I couldn't believe which filmmakers were chosen for ATG films, it was just anybody.

MINIKOMI: I've heard that towards the end ATG and the Shinjuku Bunka operated at a deficit. How did this come about?

KUZUI: On the one hand, the maintenance costs of the building were exorbitant. There were no other tenants, and the Shinjuku Bunka and the Sasori-za didn't make that much profit. While the maintenance costs were going up, our earnings were going down, and at some point that just wasn't profitable any more. More and more often ATG couldn't even cover the production costs and thereby built up a deficit we couldn't balance any longer, even with the income from film distribution. So, at some point we just had to let the curtain down... Obviously, Sanwa Kōgyō's mistaken investment in bowling halls at that time didn't help either, after that the deficit just went out of control.

MINIKOMI: What were the best years of ATG, in your view?

KUZUI: The late 1960s. I think the best years were those from 1965 to 1971, not only for ATG but for the Shinjuku Bunka and the Sasori-za as well.

MINIKOMI: Do you think that in the 1970s the extraordinary vitality of Shinjuku you have described as so inspiring for ATG was lost?

KUZUI: Everything changed after the events surrounding the United Red Army. The youth culture that had been concentrated in Shinjuku in the 1960s moved to other parts of Tōkyō. They left behind a depleted, weary town, and an entirely different set of people moved in. Shinjuku isn't

the place it used to be any more, but I still love this part of town.

MINIKOMI: Are there any ATG films that have a special significance for you?

KUZUI: *Matka Joanna od aniołów* was, as the very first ATG film, always a special film for me. Personally, I liked Alain Resnais' *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* ("Last Year in Marienbad", 1961) best. I still love this film. Among the Japanese films, it would probably be Ōshima's *Kōshikei*, Shinoda's *Shinjū ten no Amijima* ("Double Suicide", 1969), and Terayama's *Den'en ni shisu* ("Pastoral: To Die in the Country", 1974).

MINIKOMI: Terayama's *Den'en ni shisu* was the last film that was screened before the Shinjuku Bunka closed down.

KUZUI: Yes, Tōhō wanted to play Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* (1974), but fortunately there was some kind of problem. And I absolutely wanted to show Terayama's *Denen* as our last film.

MINIKOMI: If you are looking back today, what was the Shinjuku Bunka and ATG to you?

KUZUI: It was my youth, all my energy. Even though the Shinjuku Bunka existed only for 13 years, I derived a satisfaction and sense of fulfilment from my work that other people may not experience in a lifetime. I will always treasure the extraordinary people and talents I've met during my work there. I think it was my life. The ATG years were a good time. I like tumultuous times. It may be nice to lead a quiet, normal life but I would say that the agitation, turbulence and scandals of these years always made me feel that I know what I'm living for. This energy seemed to me always the proof of my existence.

MINIKOMI: What do you think about the situation of Japanese cinema today?

KUZUI: To be honest, nothing good. I do believe that there are a lot of very talented filmmakers around but there just isn't any system or organisation to support them and allow them to grow, to develop. There's hardly anyone today whom I expect to become a really great director, a master of his trade. I do come across interesting films from time to time, and then I try to keep track of the work of this filmmaker, but most of them just disappear after some time because there's nobody who supports or sponsors them. It's the same with theatre.

MINIKOMI: Because today there are no producers like yourself and no system like ATG?

KUZUI: No, there are still so many people who are enthusiastic and passionate, be it among the younger generation, or people working in film or theatre. But people in Japan today are paying too much attention to popularity – it doesn't seem to matter whether someone is really talented and capable. I think that's boring. Ōshima and Shinoda have nothing to fear today, there's no-one to succeed and surpass them. One has to surpass and outdo them, though. There should be young talented people able to surpass them. I'm sure they are there but one has to discover and support them. And you need money to do that.

MINIKOMI: Maybe the situation today isn't that different from the situation 40 years ago then? At that time too, it was hard for the directors of the Japanese Nouvelle Vague because nobody wanted to produce their films.

KUZUI: Yes, true, there are parallels. The studios at that time wanted to produce nothing but serials... for Shōchiku it was family dramas, for Tōhō the Shachō series, and for Tōei Yakuza films. There wasn't any longer a place for directors like Ozu or Mizoguchi.

MINIKOMI: So maybe sometime soon there'll be again a system like ATG?

KUZUI: Yes, in a way a new kind of avant-garde is emerging. You can see many, almost too many, experiments, in films as well as theatre productions. Anyway, we shouldn't abandon hope.

(The interview was conducted by Roland Domenig; translation by Susanne Koppensteiner)