

JETAA.NY

Newsletter for The
Japan Exchange
and Teaching
Program
Alumni Association,
New York Chapter

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The April “FUN OF OUR LIVES” Issue

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JETAA NY to Establish \$50,000 Sake Scholarship



JETAA NY has announced that it will fund a new one-year scholarship for participants to live in Japan and study sake. Known as the "JETAA Sake Scholarship," this is the first-ever program of its kind, making JETAA NY part of a cutting edge effort in internationalization.



the scholarship will be awarded based on research proposals submitted by July 1, 2007.

"We're obviously extremely excited to be part of this groundbreaking effort," said outgoing JETAA NY President Jennifer Olayon, who played a major behind-the-scenes role in establishing the scholarship. "First our alliance with the Japan National Tourist Organization, and now this. I know this will be great for JETAA's profile, showing what we're capable of doing and also giving us an edgy *je ne c'est quois*."

("Sake Scholarship" continued on page 11)

The scholarship was made possible by an agreement between JETAA NY and the Ministry of Agriculture's Division of Alcohol, Foreign Affairs Section (MADAFAS) and will cover costs of up to \$50,000 for living, including housing, travel and sake. Only JET alumni are eligible to apply, and

It's Pronounced "Jetaany"

In the first action taken by the newly-elected JETAA NY officers, the official pronunciation of the organization has been changed from "Jet-Ay-Ay New York" to "Juh-TAH-nee."

"There's always been confusion over how to pronounce the organization's name," said President Rob Tuck. "We just felt we might as well give it

("Jetaany" continued on page 10)

Jenna Bush Accepted to JET Program

CLAIR documents shared with JETAA NY in early April show that Jenna Bush, the daughter of President George W. Bush, has been accepted to the JET Program for 2007.

Bush, who like her father gained notoriety for her reputation for drinking and partying, will be working in Wakayama-ken.

("Bush" continued on page 11)

The "Fun of Our Lives" Issue

In case you haven't figured it out yet, this is the first-ever April Fool's issue of the JETAA NY Newsletter (hence, the April Fun Of Our Lives Issue). And just to be absolutely clear, all three front page articles are completely untrue (though of course there is a case to be made that the pronunciation really should be *Jetaany*).

Also, give yourself a little pat on the back if you recognized the front page photo from JET alum Randall David Cook's off-Broadway play *Sake With the Haiku Geisha*.

As you look around it's abundantly clear now that spring has finally sprung, but it hadn't quite sprung when we were putting this issue together, which is why we owe a special thanks to Nancy Ikehara, who passed along some beautiful photos of *hanamai* in Tokyo taken by her friend, including the *sakura* blossom on the front page.

The other thing that's sprung up, of course, are our new JETAA NY liasons and officers, who are at your service. Don't be shy. Step up and get to know them on pages 3 and

And lastly, a special thanks to outgoing officers Jenn, Kat and Tony for all of their hard work these last two years, for always supporting the Newsletter and (hopefully) for having a good sense of humor. ;-)

Happy *Hanami* Fool's!

Steven Horowitz
Newsletter Editor



Howdy Buckaroos!
Now that I'm not Jetaany
President anymore, I want to
write for the Newsletter!
And you should too!

E-mail ideas and comments to: newsletter@jetaany.org



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COMINGS & GOINGS

HIROSHI SASAKI

Executive Director of the JLGC



JETAA NY welcomes Hiroshi Sasaki as the new Executive Director of the Japan Local Government Center, the governmental agency responsible for supporting JET alumni activities (among many other responsibilities.) Sasaki-san is also the Deputy

Secretary General, Exchange and Information Department, Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR). He is originally from Mihara-shi, Hiroshima-ken and enjoys skiing, playing tennis, and traveling around the U.S. and the world. When asked about his goals, he responded, "I want to see as many JET alumni as possible. How my office and I should work with JETAA NY is important to focus on going forward. Playing softball together is without question one of those opportunities."

SEIKO KUBO

New JETAA USA Liason



JETAA NY is extremely happy to welcome Seiko Kubo as the new JET Liason with CLAIR. Kubo-san replaces Takao

Aharen-san who returned to Japan in March. Kubo-san has already worked for one year in New York and is very familiar with JETAA NY's activities. She hails originally from Kitakyushu in Fukuoka where she helped the Kitakyushu government promote international business ties and encourage foreign direct investment. And she wants to make sure you know her hometown is not only a major industrial and trade center in Japan, but also an international city of technology, rich in waterfronts and greenery, with a warm and friendly atmosphere. She also is very appreciative of life in NY and loves taking in the movies, museums and especially the baseball games!

SHINYA BANDO

New JETAA Canada Liason



Though he's the new JETAA Canada liason, JETAA NY is equally happy to welcome Shinya Bando to NYC. As an Assistant Director, his responsibilities

include supporting JETAA Canada activities (and also helping occasionally with NY activities like this issue's Stuff 'n Mail!) Bando-san is a native of Wakayama-shi, which is near Osaka and is famous for *mikan* and *umeboshi* as well as being home to Kataonami, one of the ten best beaches in Japan. He was previously in charge of CIR training, including organization of the CIR mid-year conference and Tokyo Orientation. He also formerly worked on waste management issues for Wakayama City. He loves playing and watching baseball, and traveling around the world, and he looks forward to meeting JET alums and hearing new ideas.

YOROSHIKU ONEGAISHIMASU!!!



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Bai-Bai 2005-2007 JETAANY officers and Honto ni Arigato!

The 2005-2007 leadership team of JETAA NY, full of dedication and tireless energy, made an indelible mark on our organization. The President, Vice-President, and Treasurer roles were filled by **Jenn Olayon**, **Katrina Barnas**, and **Tony McCormac** for two consecutive years before giving way to the new officers (See next page.) But to paraphrase Billy Joel, "Before we end, and then begin, we'll drink a toast to how it's been."

Top 3 highlights of their tenure:

1. *Great new programming and events for JETAA NY members.*
The events the officers organized -- numbering over 50 -- were as diverse as the prefectures where our alumni lived in Japan. They include events catered to the freshly minted newbies as well as weathered veteran alumni, from cultural activities, like exclusive Japan Society exhibit tours and lectures by Japanese journalists and cooking experts, to sports-related events like the Gambare Japan World Cup Breakfast and the JETAA NY Softball Tourney, as well as continuing traditional classics like the Tanabata-themed Astoria Beer Garden Happy Hour and Nihongo Dake Dinners. Additionally, the officers organized or collaborated on 30+ special meetings and events to represent the organization.

**Outgoing Officers,
O-tsukare Sama Deshita!**



The day it all started: Jenn, Tony and Kat take the reins at the beginning of 2005. (Along with former JET Liason Nagumo-san and former Secretary Cindy Chen.)

2. *Increasing JETAA NY's presence and image both globally and locally.*
In May 2006, the government of Japan recognized JETAA NY as "Special Representative for the Visit Japan Campaign." JETAA NY is the first organization ever awarded this honor. Now,

JETAA NY has a special blog section on the Japan National Tourist Organization's web site, www.japantravelinfo.com/blog. Also, Japan Society and JETAA NY formed a partnership in November 2006 to offer discount memberships and other exclusive benefits such as docent-led tours of JS exhibits to JETAA NY members.

3. *New status, new image.*
The IRS granted JETAA NY 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation status. Soon after, JETAA NY's web site (www.jetaany.org) got a much needed facelift (thanks to much help from Lee-Sean Huang) and the site was re-launched in January 2007.

Below is a snapshot of the officers' individual contributions:

As president, **Jenn Olayon** demonstrated her resourcefulness, working ceaselessly to promote JETAA NY by tapping into JETAA NY's network of alumni and community partners. She not only talked the talk, she walked the walk, constantly looking for ways to incorporating the talent of fellow JET alumni into various events, and then going out and making those events work. She organized original events and developed relationships with JET-connected sponsors who contributed funding and *omiyage*. Notable events included a Cultural Meishi Exchange fused with an art exhibit by JETs and Friends of JET, a dinner at *haute cuisine* Megu Midtown to thank volunteers from the Welcome Back Reception, and the Ganbare Japan World Cup Breakfast which benefitted from support from the JNTO. Unique sponsor contributions included goody bags from Waltzing Matilda, a raffle of individual memberships contributed by Japan Society, tea from Ito En and sushi from Genji Sushi for the softball tournament, SONY BMG CDs, and JNTO paraphernalia for the World Cup Breakfast. These ties will help JETAA NY continue to grow. So for all your hard work and passion, *domo domo* Jenn O.!

Outgoing Vice President **Katrina Barnas** was a highly effective team player, helping to bring over 50 events to our members. Notably, she was one of the architects of our continuing **Japan-o-Mania Festival**, a partnership with **Big Brother/Big Sister** and **NYdeVolunteer** which has become by far one of the most fun and well attended events each year, enjoyed by the young and *natsukashii* at heart. She also helped to revive our happy hours and to ensure JETAA NY members always have a good time. So, *San-Kyu* Katrina!

Outgoing Treasurer **Tony McCormac** evolved into JETAA NY's NPO guru, ushering in a new milestone for JETAA NY and creating a well-documented model for other alumni chapters to follow. Tony didn't mind getting his hands dirty, organizing JETAA NY's financial records all the way back to its incorporation in 1989 to prepare for review by state and federal taxing authorities, constantly communicating and setting up meetings and conference calls with JET alum *bengoshi* Dave Luce and our French London-based tax accountant, and ultimately sharing his knowledge at the JETAA USA 2005 conference with his impressive presentation on *The Ins and Outs, Pros and Cons of Becoming a 501(c)(3)*. Tony's efforts laid the groundwork to help ensure JETAA NY's sustained growth for years to come. So Tony our Treasurer, *taihen osewa ni narimashita!*

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A new slate of JETAA NY officers took office on April 1, 2007. (No joke!) The Newsletter posed a few questions to help you get to know them better.

PRESIDENT: ROB TUCK
(Miyagi-ken, 2003-05)

Current Job: Ph.D. Student, Columbia University (Japanese Lit), hopefully finishing some time in 2010.

Why I Did JET: I'd spent about 18 months in Japan as an undergrad and so I wanted to spend some extended time working in an office environment in Japan (I was a CIR) and improving my Japanese.

Where I Grew Up: Durham, UK. A very attractive town in the northeast of England, boasting a stunning 11th-century cathedral.

Last Book I Read: Maeda Ai's *Kindai Dokusha no Seiritsu*. But I'm assuming you mean for fun, in which case it'd be Jon Ronson's *The Men who Stare at Goats*.

Special Skill or Super Power: X-ray vision. Which is very useful for cutting through impenetrable swathes of literary theory jargon.

Favorite Japanese Band (other than SMAP): Bloody hell, I don't know. I never really followed J-Pop. Just put me down for Morning Musume, since that's the only one I know off the top of my head.

I Just Want to Say: Take a moment to think about what JETAA NY can do for you — what you want more or less of, or something new you want us to do that we're not doing now. Thought about it? Great. E-mail me at president@jetaany.org and tell me.

VICE PRESIDENT: MEGAN ELIZABETH MILLER (Hyogo-ken, 2000-02)

Current Job: Loss Prevention Engineer for a commercial/industrial property insurer (XL Insurance). And, when I have spare time, President and Founder of Charity Chic (www.charitychic.org).

Why I Did JET: I always promised myself I would live an exciting life (yes, I know, and now I work for an insurance company! But hey, at least it's in Manhattan). After college I turned down some engineering job offers and headed off to Japan with no idea of what I was getting into. I was looking for a "challenge," and I certainly found it in the sleepy suburbs of Akashi city, near Kobe.

Where I Grew Up: A residential section of Philadelphia, a.k.a. Northeast Philly. For those in the know, I was on the border of Mayfair & Tacony (of Tacony-Palmyra Bridge fame).

Last Book I Read: I am actually in the middle of several books right now. One is called *The Wisdom of Crowds* by James Surowiecki — it's a very interesting take on human behavior and overall market economics. I highly recommend reading it and doing mini-tests of some of the hypotheses presented. Another good book I am making my way through is called *What to Eat* by Marion Nestle. This book delves into the politics of food and breaks down the marketing ploys that lead you to believe some foods are healthier than others — very eye-opening. The last book I actually finished reading was *In Cold Blood* — great story that I just couldn't put down. Next up: the final *Harry Potter* (I have no shame).

Special Skill or Super Power: Master of quantum physics. Seriously. There is this whole theory about quantum trickery - that our thoughts affect the way things in the world around us happen. For example, when you learn about

MEET YOUR NEW JETAA OFFICERS!



From left to right: **Megan Miller** (Vice Pres), **C.J. Hoppel** (Treasurer), **Carol Elk** (Secretary) and **Rob Tuck** (President)

something new, say a brand of watch you never knew existed, and suddenly you see that watch everywhere: Brad Pitt is wearing it in his new movie, it's advertised in GQ, your best friend suddenly buys one... Anyway, that's my super power — manipulating the particles of the universe to be in synch with whatever it is I'm thinking about or working on or interested in.

Favorite Japanese Band (other than SMAP): Love Psychedelico - almost sounds like Sheryl Crow. I only have three of their singles though and don't know if they have been putting out new music since I left Japan.

I Just Want to Say: I'm really excited about being more involved with JETAA. I only started meeting all of you wonderful people a few months ago and have already had some uber-freakish coincidences, like running into a long lost Lehigh classmate and meeting someone from my high school. Typically when I am out at a bar and meeting strangers, I really would only want to run into about 10% of them ever again, but every time I am at a JET event I come home with a ton of business cards and great new ideas. It's really the best networking group I have ever been a part of. Be sure to let me know how we can make JETAA work for you too!

SECRETARY: CAROLYN ELK (Akita 2000-02)

But only my grandmother still calls me Carolyn. I started going by Carol when I was 13. I will also answer to "Carol-ko" and for the next year, "Madam Secretary."

Current Job: Technical Visit Coordinator at JTB International.

Why I Did JET: It was the only job I felt qualified for after graduating with a degree in East Asian Studies.

Where I Grew Up: Mostly in Oklahoma. But honestly, did any of us really live until we went to Japan?

Last Book I Read: *Phantoms in the Brain* by V.S. Ramachandran.

Special Skill or Super Power: I can name all 50 states in alphabetical order. Also, I can eat *natto*. Really. *Hontoo desu*.

Favorite Japanese Band (other than SMAP): The Izumi Junior High School Brass Band in Akita, Japan! Go Izumi Chuu!

I Just Want to Say: That I ain't no holla-back girl. No seriously, one of the first things I did when I moved to NYC was track down and register with JETAA NY. I'm excited to have the opportunity to be involved in a more hands-on capacity. *Ganbarimasu!*

TREASURER: C.J. HOPPEL (Nagasaki, 2004-06)

Current Job: First-year NYU Law Student

Where I Grew Up: Mostly metro-Detroit.

Why I Did JET: Some reasons: 1) Friends had done it, recommended it. 2) Other friends had studied Japanese growing up, suggested I should learn it, too. 3) Took some Japanese history/literature classes as an undergrad, enjoyed them. 4) Got placed on a small island off of an island off of Kyushu, decided that was exactly what I wanted, so I went. 5) Japan has great roads for biking.

(“New Officers” continued on page 10)

GAIJIN DA?

Asian JET Alums Reminisce About Their Experiences

While many of us remember our days on JET as a time where we stood out because of the way we looked, other JETs often had a very different experience. Ultimately, of course, we all shared that commonality of the humor, awkwardness and new perspectives on Japan and on ourselves.

Lee-Sean Huang
Oita-ken, 2003-06

The best part and the worst part about being an Asian JET is looking Japanese and "blending in." Unlike non-Asian JETs, I was able to live my life more or less anonymously. Nobody stared at me because of my exotic looks. Nobody stopped me in the streets to practice their English. Sometimes this was a relief, but other times, I resented the amount of instant attention that my JET colleagues received. I wanted to be a celebrity too!

I lived alone in a traditional Japanese house in the "downtown" area of my city. I got a lot of random people knocking on my door — the NHK guy, Jehovah's Witnesses, door-to-door salesmen, and even a local politician campaigning for reelection. Usually, I would engage them in Japanese conversation, just for kicks. When I finally revealed that I wasn't Japanese, most of them were really surprised. They were also surprised to learn that I lived alone. The salesmen (not salespeople, because they were always men), would always ask if my wife or my mother was home. I guess it was hard for them to fathom that I could be a young single guy, living alone, and managing to cook and clean and do all that domestic stuff by myself. One Jehovah's Witness lady even started bringing me meals in Tupperware!

Lee Uehara
Chiba-ken, 1993-95

Unfortunately, the closest thing to being *nisei* in my house meant that I used chopsticks and ate sushi. I had to painfully learn the subtle difference in pronunciation between *hashi* – chopsticks and *hashi* — bridge, along with everyone else. Heck, I didn't learn the wonders of rice cookers until my dad bought me one while in college.

So, fast forward to the day of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test during my first year on JET. More than a few folks guffawed when they heard that I was going for the 3rd level, remarking that I was taking the easy way out. I hadn't even heard of the JLPT until I got to Japan even though I did take a simple Japanese class in college. Thus, I didn't really get why people assumed I would take a higher level and I never gave it another thought. Well, until one of my first-ever visits to Sizzler! Whoo-hoo!

During the conversation among the six of us who regularly spent \$50 on



the Sunday buffets, a debate over how to interpret an expression came up. Everyone turned and looked to me for the answer, even the know-it-all-and-expert-on-all-things-Japanese-including-how-to-pick-up-women-with-catchy-lines guy. You know the guy I'm talking about.

"Why would you think that I know the answer?" I asked, puzzled, looking at *that* guy.

"Because you're fluent," he responded.

"What on earth gave you that impression?" I asked, completely stunned and wondering

how I managed to fool everyone without even being aware of it, including *that* guy.

"Well, you're half-Japanese, that's why!" came the response.

Now it all made sense to me – including the comments during the JLPT. Just because I have a Japanese last name and some dark brown hair, even Americans assumed I grew up speaking Japanese at home. Oy!

The funny thing is that later on my Japanese did get good. So good in fact, even the Pizza Hut phone order people were fooled into thinking I was a Kanto-region Uehara. This decade, however, I'm back to square one. But, I still have my rice cooker.

Crystal Wong
Iwate-ken, 2002-04

One general theme and not so much of a story that defined my experience as an Asian in Iwate was how I would be out with my boyfriend at the time, who spoke much better Japanese than I did but looks-wise better fit the *gaijin* profile, and even though it would be him doing most of the speaking, many Japanese people would continue with their questions to me, as if I were a ventriloquist and he was my puppet. It happened not just with him but with other friends as well.

Another thing I remember well is the wave of shock that would pass over people's faces when they realized I wasn't Japanese, usually after I introduced myself or someone else "explained" me, i.e. with the roaming salespeople, bento delivery people, teachers, students, et. al that would come through the teachers' room at school. After that, they'd be very interested, ask where my parents were from and

(“Asian JET” continued on page 12)

Japan Society Presents

JAPAN: FROM CHINA WAR TO CHINA PEACE*A Discussion Moderated by JET Alum & Yale Professor Michael Auslin**Reviewed by Brian Hersey*

The topic of Japan and China relations has been prominent in the news over the last few years as former Prime Minister Koizumi continued his visits to the ever-controversial Yasukuni Shrine and China saw periodic protests and even riots after a friendly soccer match in 2003. So, when our august newsletter editor mentioned that JET alumnus and Associate Professor at Yale (aside: what have I been doing with my life?), **Michael Auslin** was going to moderate a talk titled *Japan: From China War to China Peace*, I volunteered to attend and report. This would be a good chance to get filled in on the topic and see what an expert thought. This reporter, whose pitiful knowledge of Japanese diplomatic history pales in comparison with the vast dark empty chasm that is his knowledge of Chinese history, found the talk very enlightening.

Professor Ezra Vogel, Emeritus, of Social Sciences at Harvard University gave the main talk. For you non-Japan Studies majors out there (like me), included in Professor Vogel's vast record of accomplishment is his 1980s bestseller, *Japan as Number One*, and his government service as National Intelligence Officer for Asia from 1993 to 1995. Additionally, he demonstrated his knowledge of Japanese by using some expressions in his speech and then this reporter witnessed him chatting away in apparently effortless Chinese (I'm guessing Mandarin) after the seminar. Professor Vogel spoke for about 40 minutes, answered questions for about 15 and then wandered upstairs for drinks and appetizers. I brought a notebook "in case there was anything I wanted to write down" and wound up taking six pages of single-spaced notes from the well-organized talk. I will spare you a summary of Professor Vogel's talk, as enlightening as it was. A few themes, however, emerged and may be worth considering. For this author, at any rate, they were interesting (my apologies for any distortions which will no doubt occur as the lecture was fed through my own prejudices and perceptions...).

One theme is how diplomatic and domestic politics intertwine (no surprise for anyone reading the newspapers today, either). While professor Vogel acknowledged the Japanese atrocities in its war with China (which, he noted, was either the largest or second largest war of all time in terms of casualties), he also noted that China, which had been governed by a squabbling mass of warlords in the '20s and '30s, has repeatedly played up Japanese atrocities to help foster a united sense of Chinese identity. In response to the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, for example, China began to increase its patriotic education (much as Japan is now), in part by emphasizing Japanese war crimes.

Another theme that emerged was the importance of having credible, capable and far-thinking leadership. Japan in the 1930s had a modern military and tactical capability, but no guiding strategy, so the long-term consequences of its moves in China and elsewhere were ill-considered (obscured by flag-waving machismo and patriotism?... this seems vaguely familiar). Deng Xiaoping, whose background as a revolutionary warrior put his patriotism beyond question, was able to warm relations and became the first Chinese leader in 2,500 years to visit Japan. This permitted him to travel to Japan, warm relations, meet the emperor (who apologized) and publicly acknowledge that China could learn a great deal from Japan's



JAPAN 100
SOCIETY YEARS



*Japan and China history experts,
Harvard's Ezra Vogel and Yale's
Michael Auslin*

industrial progress. Jiang Zemin, on the other hand, lacked revolutionary credentials. In his 1998 visit to Japan, he demanded an apology, motivated in part by a need to shore up his domestic credibility, annoying the Japanese body politic, which has grown tired of apologies.

Japan's contrition was another theme of the speech. Professor Vogel also noted that the frequently-cited comparison of Germany's apologies and reconciliation with the rest of Western Europe with Japan is unfair. The victory of the Chinese Communists over the Nationalists, combined with America's interest in shoring up a non-communist ally in Asia, placed Japan squarely on the opposite side of the Cold and Korean Wars. Unlike Germany, which was forced to work with France and the UK almost immediately,

there was no immediate opportunity to make amends. He also noted that various apologies have been made over the years, and that perhaps Koizumi's controversial visits to Yasukuni reflected both a personal stubbornness and a political canniness; sensing that the Japanese public had grown weary of constantly producing new apologies although the anti-militarist convictions remain strong in the body politic.

Finally, Professor Vogel made some observations about the Sino-Japanese relationship going forward. Generally, he observed that the

("Japan Society" continued on page 10)

MICHAEL AUSLIN APPEARS AS CELEBRITY JUDGE ON *IRON CHEF*

Who saw JET alum **Michael Auslin** on *Iron Chef America*? On April 8, the Yale professor of Japanese history served as a celebrity judge for the **Battle Sable** episode. How did that happen? Apparently he was at a dinner with the show's producer which led to an invite to appear on the show.



Humble in his interview comments at the beginning of the show, Michael showed himself to be rather candid and independent in his critique of the various dishes, differing at points with both fellow celebrity judge **Felicity Huffman** and also with Japanese food critic **Akiko Katayama**, and coming off as a down-to-earth yet refined everyman, particularly with one of his responses to Akiko's criticisms when he countered, "I thought it was very nice, though perhaps it was just too subtle for me." Though Chef Morimoto was the victor, Michael said that Chef Hopkins' sable chowder was amazing. Keep your eye on the show, as his solid performance may earn him repeat appearances.

**JETAANY
SOCIETY PAGE**

by Yoko Shitteiru

Welcome back *watashi no amigos* to another special edition of the JETAANY - oops, I mean, *Juh-TAH-nee* Society Page. No sense beating around the *sakura*, there's too much ground to cover so let's get down to business.

This segment kicks off with the **Development Meeting** back in December at the **Den of Cin** (downstairs at **Two Boots**). While the meeting itself was reportedly good fun and rather productive, it concluded with an intriguing showing of *Battle Royale*, the gripping **Kinji Fukasaku** movie, starring **Beat Takeshi**.

The *Jetaany* partying started January 27 with the **Shinnenkai**, this year again at **Naniwa**. But as the partying officially kicked off, a wonderful "cultural" speech by **Sakura Suzuki** on *enkais* was almost marred by scandal when **First Man Tristan**, *boi-furendo* of **President Jenn Olayon**, was selected in the raffle for the **Japan Society Membership** but quickly returned it in the name of avoiding any appearance of impropriety, whereupon it was subsequently won by ... **Sakura**. You go girl... to the Japan Society! Meanwhile, it wasn't quite a party until **Carol, Ariel** and **Nick** accidentally jeopardized the possibility of hosting future events there by first knocking out the window screen and then somehow causing the sliding door to become nearly permanently stuck. All of this was enjoyed by **Christy Jones'** fiancé **Matt**, who weathered his first mass JET alum experience with much aplomb. (Sounds like a keeper!) Meanwhile, the party expanded upon the realization that **Harumi Goto** and the **QUICK USA crew** were in the house, and JETAANY legend **Matt Jungblutt** popped in for a cameo before everyone headed to the *nijikai* at the now traditional generic midtown Irish bar around the corner (whatever it's called). And it was there that new **Vice Prez Megan Miller** reconnected with long-lost college mate **Dave Fusco**.



Former Veep **Kat Barnas** caught on camera with unidentified JET alum at *Okinawa-style Nihongo Dake Dinner*.

Turns out that Japanese class they signed up for was good for something after all. The *coup de grace* was that everyone went home with a goody bag filled with *oishii* cookies made by JETAANY's own, **Laura Epstein**, budding entrepreneur and owner of **Waltzing Matilda's NYC** (waltzingmatildasnyc.com)

.. The social circuit went upscale in March with the **Cultural Meishi Exchange** at **Highline** in the **Meatpacking District**. Amidst the **mango mojitos**, in the JET Alum photo contest (bring a photo you took in the past in Japan) it was **Lee-Sean Huang's** bustling shot of the train station and clock wooing the crowd to take first place, **Julie Hiromoto's** photo capturing her friend in the midst of bridal preparations taking a very close second, and **Patrick Dwyer's** artsy photo of the eminently recognizable Shinjuku Municipal Building coming in third. Prizes included a **Uniqlo** gift certificate, a *kaiten-zushi* gift certificate, and a charming *History of Japanese Photography* coffee table book. And lastly, not to imply that these contests are rigged, but **Lee-Sean** also won the signed book at the **shinnenkai** in January and **Patrick** won a calligraphy scroll at last year's **Cultural Meishi Event**. **Yoku Shitteiru's** motto: "We drop completely unsubstantiated innuendo. You decide"..... Also notable in the JET alum community, **Anthony Bianchi**, the **Brooklyn-born Inuyama City Councilman**, came in third in his bid for mayor of Inuyama. But sources say this is just one more step in the beginning of his political career in Japan, so stay tuned.... On another political front, **Shinji Hirai** left his position in NY as the Executive Director of the Japan Local Government Center in New York after he was elected as **Governor of Tottori Prefecture!**... And celebrity author **Bruce Feiler** recently launched his new blog www.fasterfeiler.com where he discusses issues pertaining to religion in the modern world... Also, before she was a celebrity JETAANY Secretary, **Carol Elk** was getting written up in the January 15 issue of *The New Yorker's Talk of the Town* for her work at **JTB** with Japanese tourists and commenting on the myth of **Paris Syndrome**... And a special *omedetou* to **President Rob Tuck** who recently received the prestigious **Honjo International Scholarship** for graduate studies.... **Yoku Shitteiru** is sad to say *sayonara* to two special JET alums. The first is **Michelle Andrews** who recently left **Japan Society** to pursue her long-time interest in studying Spanish in **Argentina**. As

("Jetaany Society" continued on page 9)



Honjo Scholarship winning **Rob Tuck** and **Lee-Sean Huang** (back in their civilian days) *shabetteiru-ing* in *Nihongo* at the February *Okinawa-style Nihongo Dake Dinner* organized by *Aharen-san*.



Former **Pres Jenn Olayon**, **First Man Tristan** and renowned cultural speaker **Sakura** at **Shinnenkai** at **Naniwa** in January.



The new Jetaany pronunciation logo rolled out at the Shinnenkai.



Former New York Governor George Pataki with new Tottori Prefecture Governor and former JLGC Director Shinji Hirai.

(“JETAANY Society” contin-

Director of Membership, she played a major role in forging an alliance with JETAA NY and getting discounted memberships for JET alums.... The second sayonara is for frequent Newsletter contributor **Stacy Smith**, who will be leaving NY to be an interpreter/ translator in Tokyo — but not before a freakin’ kickass stint as an interpreter traveling around the world on the

Peace Boat! We’ll miss them both. But don’t think for a minute that just because they’re halfway around the world that Yoku Shiteiru won’t know what they’re up to.... And speaking of around the world, has **Long Island**

(“JETAANY Society” continued on page 10)



JETAA International Rep Shannan Spisak with the JETAA SoCal crew at the Japanese American National Museum’s 20th Anniversary Gala.

FAREWELL MESSAGE FROM AHAREN-SAN

Takao Aharen-san left New York on March 26 after serving two years with the Japan Local Government Center (JLGC) and the past year as the official JET liason, a time that witnessed great growth and progress for JETAA NY, due in no small amount to his enthusiastic support and eagerness for learning, for helping, and for building relationships. As much as we appreciated him, it is fair to say that he may have appreciated JETAA NY, his experience in New York and traveling around the Western Hemisphere even more. Below is a farewell message he asked to include in the Newsletter.



Thank you very much for your great support!!

I am going back to Okinawa at the end of March and will return to work for Okinawa Prefectural Government in April.

I now realize time really flies. Working and living in New York for two years was a very special time in my life. It has been very nice to meet all of you and work with you.

The Pre-Departure Orientation, the softball game, the Welcome Back Reception, monthly meetings with JETAA NY officers and more... I was very fortunate to have been given this responsibility to work with you in all of these ways, and I learned a lot.

I also thank you for encouraging me to organize the *Nihongo-dake* dinner Okinawan-style last February. It was a wonderful experience and I was very happy to see everyone enjoying Okinawan food!

JETAA NY is now facing a turning point and an opportunity to grow more as it has become a Special Representative for the Japan National Tourist Organization’s *Visit Japan Campaign*. And, it has also established new partnerships with a number of organizations, including JNTO, Japan Society, Big Brother/Big Sister and others. It also obtained not-for-profit status this past January. I am very happy that I was here to witness all of these positive changes.

Even though I will be living in Okinawa, I will visit the JETAA NY web site often, and I will continue to pay attention to your activities!

Lastly, I would like to express my special thanks especially to Jennifer, Katrina, Tony, Steven and Rob for being a big help for the past year. Your group was tremendous, and I was always impressed. Without your help, my job would have been much more difficult. I want you to know how much I enjoyed working with you!!

I wish everyone best of luck. *Arigatou gozaimashita!!*

Sincerely,

Takao Aharen

(“JETAANY Society” continued from page 9)

City overtaken Brooklyn as the new JET alum hotspot or what? First Brian Hersey moved to LIC (where he subsequently hosted a splendid *Nihongo Dake Dinner*). Then Nancy Ikehara bought a place in LIC a month or so ago, followed immediately by Megan Miller. They have Clara Solomon and Cindy “Mc” Hoffman in their backyard in Woodside, and Scott Hineker a block away in Sunnyside..... Special welcome to Jennifer Wascher out in Seatle who just took over as Newsletter editor for JETAA Pacific Northwest from the talented Elizabeth Sharpe..... And where in the world is Janak Bhimani these days? In February he covered the infamous *Idiotarod* for his Japanese video log program, and then spent time jetting between Florida and New York to cover the newest Japanese imports at spring training..... Isaac Leader, on the other hand, is reportedly heading north to start med school at U of Vermont.... Getting back to the Ookii Ringo, Yoku Shiteiru loves when JET alums procreate, and this issues procreation update includes former Treasurer Sue Castroman (*Ishikawa, 1996-98*), who now has a 3.5-year-old daughter and a two-year-old
 (“JETAANY Society” continued on page 15)



たけのこ

Ben Lang, transcontinentally spreading Takenoko.



Former JETAA NY Presidents Yvonne Thurman, Shannan Spisak and Jennifer Olayon, former Veep Kat Barnas, Lawrence Silver, Benjamin Meyer and an unidentified JET alum at the reception following the Columbia Business School presentation Investors Unleashed: The Rise of Shareholder Activism in

(“Jetaany” continued from page 1)

an upscale feel.”

Vice-President Megan Miller echoed Tuck’s sentiment. “You see all the names of neighborhoods changing these days. I mean, what the heck is LoHo? But you have to keep up with the times and the trends.”

Secretary Carol Elk cited a shift in the JETAANY community demographic. “If you look at our community, it’s a lot of young, hip, edgy types who read the New Yorker,” said Elk. “Our alumni community is just, like, totally JETAANY, y’know?”

While incoming Treasurer CJ Hoppel signed off on the pronunciation change, he also voiced concerns. “Frankly, I just think justifying our new not-for-profit status is going to pose unique challenges with a name as darned cool and edgy as JETAANY.”

This article is choouuu not true. But go ahead and pronounce it however you want.

(“Japan Society” continued from page 7)

leaders of both nations have realized that the situation needs to be reined in before it overheats. He suggested that China be a bit more fair and objective and that Japan endeavor to be more sensitive (stopping the Yasukuni visits). Although the collapse of the LDP has made long-term high-level contacts with Japan harder to build, they still must be developed. Japan needs to improve its ability to engage in international dialogue, especially in English. The Chinese diplomatic core, he noted, is doing a superior job of training people who are comfortable in English and sending them to international conferences to advocate their positions. Japan has far too few people capable of doing this. On the whole, however, Japan has historically done a good job of adjusting to rising world powers, and he seems to believe that a heightened conflict between Japan and China, while not impossible, is not likely either.

(“New Officers” continued from page 5)

Special Skill or Super Power: Incredibly soft skin.

Last Book I Read: (non-law) Pablo Neruda’s *Extravagaria*. Before that: Brian Greene’s *The Elegant Universe*. Before that: Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*.

Favorite Japanese Band (other than SMAP): Don’t follow it. During my time in Japan I listened to a lot of minimal-house.

I Just Want to Say: I’m looking forward to working with the rest of the board and meeting the NYC JET alums who are itching to come out of the woodwork.

SOCIAL CHAIR: MONICA YUKI (*Saitama 2002-2004*)

Current Job: Research Analyst at USA WEEKEND.

Where I Grew Up: The sunny beaches of Malibu, California.

Special Skill or Super Power: Using Jedi mind tricks to get people to come to happy hours.

Last Book I Read: I’m not much of a reader but the last bar I went to was Trinity in the UES. But if you are really only interested in what I read it was *The Da Vinci Code*.

Favorite Japanese Band (other than SMAP): Love Psychedelico & Hitomi Yaida

I Just Want to Say: I am so excited to be the new JET social chair. There are so many awesome things to do in NY and we have a great alumni group of people to do them with. If you have any suggestions on venues or activities please let me know. I am always up for an adventure!



Social Chair
 Monica Yuki

("Sake Scholarship" continued from page 1)

Research proposals can cover any of a range of topics according to the scholarship's guidelines, including:

...any topic or issue of opinion to concerning sake production, marketing or consumption about the fields of science, economics, sociology, scientology or anthropology.

"It's wonderful that you can really be creative in what you want to study," said incoming JETAA NY President Rob Tuck who headed the scholarship guidelines drafting committee. "You could research the brand management of sake or the evolution of the chemical processes involved. Though as a judge, I'd likely look rather favorably on more consumption-oriented topics, such as which types of sake most quickly cause inebriation."

Criteria for judging applicants' proposals are available at www.jetaany.org/sakescholarship and include substance, relevance, creativity, practicality, writing ability and sake consumption ability. Fluency with Japanese is not a requirement. "It's our sense that sake consumption tends to inadvertently improve Japanese language ability, even among people who say they don't really know how to speak," according to Tuck. Applications will be judged by a panel consisting of MADAFAS officials and JET Alumni to be headed by former JETAA NY Social Chair Matt Jungblutt.



Creativity in research proposals is encouraged.

"We look forward to increased internationalization and promotion of Japanese sake," said MADAFAS Director Yutaka Mitaka, who originally proposed the idea to JETAA NY in early 2005. "We wish JETAA NY members to be experienced experts on sake and will produce a great researcher."

While concerns have been voiced that a sake scholarship may seem a bit frivolous and a waste of Japanese taxpayers' money, former JET Alumni Vice President Katrina Barnas points out that the word *o-sake* is a very respectful term and concept, which is exemplified by its ubiquity in Japan and the high regard in which sake brewers are held in Japanese society. "In Japanese communities the sake brewer is generally held in higher regard than judges and mayors," said Barnas. "And just as beer-dispensing vending machines are a common sight in the Japan of today, so too are that of your flush-faced salaryman enjoying himself in a very public drunken revelry, whether it's during *hanami* season or after a long day at the office."

JET Alum Brian Hersey echoed the sentiment. "When you get down to it, alcohol is responsible for a lot of interesting behavior in Japan," said Hersey. "Without it, the entire J-pop, comedy and snack food industries would surely go to pot. I mean, who wants to eat squid-flavored corn puffs sober?"

Portions of this article are completely made up. Actually, the entire article is a completely artificial concoction. Happy April Fool's!

("Bush" continued from page 1)

While some in the JET alumni community are concerned that her association with the JET Program may be PR nightmare given her reputation as well as her father's unpopularity due to his handling of the Iraq war, his failure to control the nuclear ambitions of North Korea, the U.S. Attorney scandal, the Gitmo prison, the torture scandal, the impending deficit, the Jack Abramoff scandal and countless other scandals caused by the liberal media, others see the development more positively.

"Going abroad always opens up your world view," pointed out JET alum Alexei Esikoff. "I think she'll develop a more nuanced take on foreign cultures and hopefully pass that on to her father, maybe by keeping a blog so that he can keep up on how she's doing. Ahh, who am I kidding? She'll just end up partying and singing *karaoke* as much as I did."



New JET Program participant Jenna Bush teaches her father the customary gesture for indicating that one is from Wakayama.

From Babe Ruth's trip to Tokyo in 1934 to the national tour of the entire cast and crew of *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift*, celebrity visits to Japan have long been associated with goodwill and, increasingly, internationalization. According to noted international trends analyst Kent Christian, "Celebrity applicants are not typically considered for JET due in part to the glitz and glamour factor outweighing the ideals of actual exchange" as well as the fact that "some have behaved in a shameful and irresponsible manner in the face of gracious hospitality."

A CLAIR administrator who asked to be identified as Himitsu-san recalls, "We kept getting calls from Suntory Whiskey about a certain film star who was trying to supplement their income in ways inappropriate to the JET contract. I couldn't tell you how many calls we received from the good people of Toyama-ken about the driving range he constructed on his roof."

Another CLAIR official who wished to remain anonymous said, "You should see the list of just the B-list celebrities we've rejected. I can't name names, but the Naked Cowboy was one of them," the official confided. "That's not really a name, right?"

"The merit of inviting a Jenna Bush on a program as distinguished as JET is mixed at best," said noted Tokyo tabloid columnist Frankee Sakitsumi. "Clearly, JET wishes to avoid a repeat of the Bush Sr. vomit incident. As the daughter of one of the world's highest-

profile politicians, it's good from a diplomatic angle, but personally I wonder if Ms. Bush would have made a better candidate for the JETAA NY Sake Scholarship."

FYI, Jenna Bush was not really accepted to the program. C'mon. The program's standards are higher than that. Plus, you gotta think you would've heard about this in a tabloid already.

(“Asian JET” continued from page 6)

then usually make some reference to shumai or ramen.

I liked telling students about my Chinese-American-ness too. I liked the “oohs and ahs” that ensued when I wrote my Chinese name on the board for them, and I felt like that helped them to feel more connected to me and understand that I could be both Chinese and American at the same time.

I hope in some way that meeting me helped them to realize that Americans come in a lot of different forms and from a lot of different places. I also liked telling people about how New York was full of people from everywhere, and how there were tons of Japanese people here too.

Hope this helps, if I can think of more specific incidents I'll send them your way too.

**Nancy Ikehara
Yokohama-shi CIR, 1994-97**

Speaking purely from my own experience, the greatest disadvantage of looking like the masses is the assumption by society that you are Japanese, and thus familiar with the local traditions and customs. The pressure to blend in can be daunting at times. And even with all the exposure I'd been given to the Japanese language, arts and culture throughout childhood, I could not avoid making a few *faux pas* as an adult living, studying or working in Japan.

For instance, I'll never forget the face of a retail clerk, aghast with horror, as she came running from out of nowhere to bid me to remove my shoes and place them OUTSIDE the carpeted dressing room. To this lady, I must have been some bumpkin from out of town. But I'd simply never thought to apply the custom of slipping off one's shoes to a dressing room or any area outside the *genkan*.

On another occasion I was asked by a store clerk at a posh Ginza department store whether the gift item I'd just purchased required *noshigami*. I had never heard of the term and resigned myself to asking what it was. She looked at me quizzically and then lifted up to my face a piece of wrapping paper printed with a colorful cord tied into a decorative knot, commonly used to wrap formal, celebratory gifts. *Ah no, that won't be necessary...but thanks.*

Yet the irony is my story is no longer confined to one side of the Pacific. I've recently returned to the U.S. after a 12-year stint in Japan (three as a JET participant). I now do public relations work for the regional headquarters of a Tokyo-based multinational.

I was recently at our Atlanta plant, where plastic colorants are manufactured for automobile interiors for the likes of Toyota, Honda, Nissan, et al. While I was taking the plant tour, one of the guys on the floor casually asked with that oh-so-charming Southern drawl,

“So, what's your name?” “Nancy,” I yelled back over the din of heavy machinery. And to my surprise, he exclaimed, “Why, that's an American name!” Then it dawned on me that this gentleman must think that I'm a *Nihonjin* woman, given the large number of visitors from Japan who can be found on-premises on any given day. I decided to dispel this myth ASAP and went into a rather lengthy sermon on how I was born and bred in L.A. and lived in Japan for the last 12 years. To which he bantered back, “I would have never guessed you'd lived in Japan that long. You speak nearly perfect English.” *Did he just say NEARLY perfect English? Boy, all those years in Japan must have done a number on my ability to converse in my mother tongue!*

Must admit, the incident made me feel a little like a fish out of water. Here I am, back on my home turf, trying to convince my fellow American that I, too, am a citizen of this nation. Made me realize how rare (and

wonderful!) a bicultural upbringing is and how strong preconceived notions of a group of people can be. At the very least, it gives me some interesting stories to laugh and write about.

**Iku Fujimatsu
Hiroshima-ken, 1999-01**

“Have you met the new AET yet?” asked the woman walking past me to her colleague. “No, but I hear she's here today,” he replied. They didn't even notice me as I sat on the hall bench. I was not going to be a special *gaijin* in town that people turned to look at and students crowded around.

Before heading to Japan, I thought about adopting an Americanized or Western-sounding name. Was I more of a Jane or an Ashley? No, definitely not a Jane...and Ashley didn't fit quite right...besides it would be difficult to pronounce with the “I”...*Ah-shu-ree* was not what I was looking for. Ultimately, I went with the name I was given.

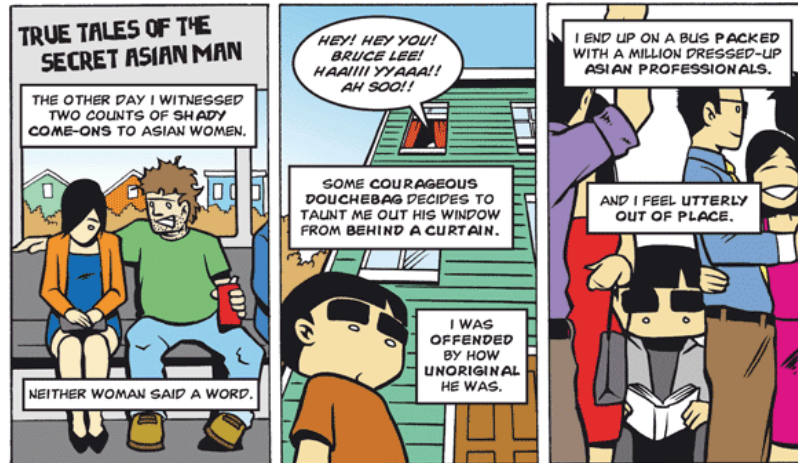
There were both pros and cons to being a Japanese-American JET—particularly one who spoke the language. My students appreciated that I could understand them and accepted me as a somewhat “real” teacher. Other teachers told me that I was more adept at answering students' questions since I understood where the students were confused and how to explain grammar to a Japanese speaker.

On the other hand, my students felt that they didn't need to try to speak English to me—even in class. I wasn't the *gaijin* wonder that my town was expecting. I had spent my summer vacations in Japan throughout my childhood so I looked and sounded like everyone else (albeit without the Hiroshima accent), but as a native New Yorker, I was too direct and too loud.

While my two years were full of the types of experiences that I share with all of my fellow JETs—experiences I cherish—perhaps most important to me was the opportunity to live in my parents' homeland and learn about my other culture and its people. In the end, I was able happy to find a place where I blended in.

SECRET ASIAN MAN By Tak

secretasianman@weeklydig.com • www.BlackLava.net/sam • ©2005 Tak Toyoshima



Opera Review**Puccini's MADAMA BUTTERFLY****Reviewed by Justin Tedaldi**

I was having coffee in Tokyo recently with a Japanese girl whom I hadn't seen in over a year. The conversation turned to relationships.

"I don't know what he means," she said, referring to the man she first met in New York who abruptly decided to pull the plug on their two-year relationship. "All he did was send a message saying that his life was all over the place and I haven't heard from him since then. What should I do about my boyfriend?"

I set my cup down and cleared my throat.

"Don't you mean your ex-boyfriend?" I asked.

She gave me a smile.

"Of course he's still my boyfriend," she said as if it were an absolute fact. "There's no reason for it to end between us because I love him so much."

I cocked my head and thought, *this is all so familiar...*

From March 11 through April 22, the New York City Opera ushered in its spring season with a dozen performances of Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. Not to be confused with David Henry Hwang's 1988 Broadway play *M. Butterfly* (which itself was inspired by the former's themes of exoticism and ideals perceived through the eyes of a foreign visitor), *Madama Butterfly* finds its Japanese and American characters communicating via the Italian libretto originally scribed by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa.

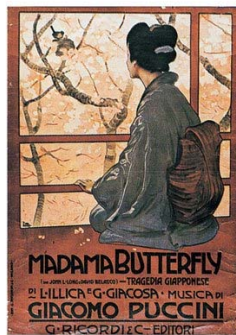
This year marks the 100th anniversary of the opera's first performance in New York. It originally debuted on February 17, 1904 in Milan, which Puccini himself described at the time as nothing less than a "lynching." After some revisions were made to enrich the drama and subdivide the second act, *Butterfly* was given a second shot three months later. The tweaking paid off, and since its definitive version was christened in 1911, the ever-green has cemented its reputation as the most often-performed opera in North America.

The opera's origins lie in American playwright David Belasco's one act play *Madame Butterfly*, which was based on a magazine story by John Luther Long, which in turn was derived from Pierre Loti's novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887) and a real-life incident involving a *geisha*. Both the opera and the events that inspired it took place in Nagasaki, which proudly recognizes it to this day.

Like some of the best dramatic works, *Madama Butterfly* focuses on a specific place and period (turn of the 20th century Japan), yet its themes (love, desire, cultural clashes and tragedy) remain universal and timeless. With the indulgence of a few artistic liberties, the plot could boil in Nebraska just as easily as Nagasaki.

Three acts set the course as such: Boy marries girl, boy leaves girl as girl pines for his return years later, and boy returns with new wife to ask for one last thing from girl. The historical backdrop and the strong supporting characters only add to the procession of drama.

Directed by Puccini veteran Mark Lamos—who previously staged *Butterfly* in 1998 and was involved in the San Francisco Opera's edition of the composer's own *La bohème*—the New York City Opera's *Butterfly* stars native New Yorker and soprano Angela Maria Blasi in the title role; Cuban tenor Raúl Melo as U.S. Navy Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton; and Korean-born mezzo-soprano Misoon Ghim as Suzuki, Butterfly's maid; baritone Kyungmook Yum as Prince Yamadori, a would-be suitor for Butterfly in Pinkerton's absence; and American-born mezzo-soprano Kristen Forrest Leich as Kate Pinkerton, the proverbial other woman; baritone Grant Youngblood as U.S. consul and Pinkerton's friend Sharpless; and tenor Robert Mack as the not-entirely-honorable marriage broker Goro.



Credit must also be given to stage director Helena Binder and set designer Michael Yeargan for the performance's exquisite look. In each act daylight dims more and more, with light and shadow effectively used to enhance the mood without over exaggerating the drama. The start of the opera treats the viewer to a fleet of miniature black warships hanging ominously in the sky. By the end of the act and the commencement of the wedding, they almost seem to vanish as day turns to night and the massive shoji screens that open and close to suggest both scene changes and the passing of time brings us inside the newlyweds' home.

Other stage effects—such as the booming of the canons in the harbor and Butterfly and Suzuki's decoration of the house with flowers for Pinkerton's return after a three-year absence—also highlight the emotions of the characters while enriching the palette of their interpersonal relationships. In the final act, the use of symbols and gestures underscore a cycle that begins brimming with hope, then slowly withers into disappointment and, finally, tragedy.

For those in the audience new to the story, or to operatic Italian, *Madama Butterfly* is presented with supertitles which are projected above the stage, providing a handy English translation of the libretto. The feeling is like watching a real-time foreign language film, which also captures the asides and snippets of humor in full flavor.

At the heart of the opera is the music itself. As one of Puccini's signature works, the score and songs of *Madama Butterfly* are widely known throughout the world. The distinct range of voices by the leads blends together with conductor George Manahan for a transcendent theatergoing experience.

Reflecting back on that conversation in Tokyo, I was reminded how art and life are synonymous: you can't have one without the other. Just as Pinkerton served as the bane of Butterfly's existence, he also was a source of joy for the young bride. Tragedy then may not simply be rooted in fate, but in the idea that even the thing you desire most can suddenly dart away from you as it flutters off to another place, vanishing completely out of sight.

Just like a butterfly.

Japanese Film Review

**Kon Ichikawa's
THE BURMESE HARP and FIRES ON THE PLAIN**

Reviewed by Lyle Sylvander

The **Criterion Collection** has released more classic Japanese films than any other DVD distributor. After releasing the films of **Akira Kurosawa**, **Yasujiro Ozu** and **Kenji Mizoguchi**, the Collection series has now turned its attention to **Kon Ichikawa**.

Ichikawa's reputation among film scholars is not as grand as that of the other great directors in the series. This lack of recognition does not rest with the quality of his films but rather with the nature of film criticism itself.

The French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema* launched serious criticism with its "auteur theory" – wherein the director was elevated to the status of literary author. Such analysis allowed film critics to connect a thematic consistency among the films in a director's oeuvre. The art house distributors of the 1950s and 1960s capitalized on this notion by marketing films according to the director's name. Audiences would flock to the latest Kurosawa or Bergman film as a result of this "branding".

For the more eclectic Ichikawa, however, this sort of system limited the size of his international distribution. Ichikawa's films run the gamut from dark comedy (*Odd Obsession*) to revenge drama (*An Actor's Revenge*) to sports documentary (*Tokyo Olympiad*). It wasn't until the Museum of Modern Art's 2002 retrospective that American critics became seriously interested in his work. Indeed, critics and audiences began to see his eclecticism as a strength rather than a weakness.

Criterion was wise to begin its Ichikawa releases with two war films, *The Burmese Harp* (1956) and *Fires on the Plain* (1959). Despite their similar subject matter, the two films showcase the director's stylistic variety.

The Burmese Harp, based on the novel by **Michio Takeyama**, follows a Japanese troop in Burma at the close of the Second World War.

When Japan surrenders to the Allies, the soldier Mizushima (**Shojo Yasui**) is assigned to leave his squad and convince another troop to surrender to British forces. When the general refuses, Mizoguchi is shot in the leg and left to fend for himself. A Buddhist monk nurses him back to health and leaves him with his robe. While journeying back to his unit, he encounters piles of human remains from the war and burns them. He gradually associates his second chance at life with a spiritual mission to help the souls of the war dead. In the process he becomes a real man of the cloth and vows to remain in Burma and live the life of the ascetic.

Ichikawa tells this story from two vantage points: that of Mizushima and that of his platoon. In doing so, he exemplifies the struggle within Mizushima's own soul as he is caught between two worlds: that of his nation and that of a higher spiritual authority.

Ichikawa was trained as a painter and began his career as an illustrator – *The Burmese Harp's* *mes-en-scene* reflects this background. He films Burma in wide-angle shots, the landscaped littered with holy temples and shrines on one end, and earthy carcasses and vultures on the other. By shooting Mizushima as one small point on a large landscape, a visual motif that reoccurs throughout the film, Ichikawa expertly visual-

izes the character's spiritual burden. The film also has a slow and contemplative pacing that mirrors Mizushima's solemn reflection.

For his second war film, Ichikawa chose to adapt one of the most controversial novels in Japanese literature, *Fires on the Plain* by **Shohei Ooka**.

Unlike Takeyama, Ooka actually served in the Japanese army during the war and witnessed the horrors of war himself. This may account for the stylistic differences between *Harp* and *Fires*. In contrast to the former film, *Fires on the Plain* offers no hope of redemption for any its characters – in fact, it is one of the most uncompromising and graphic films ever made.

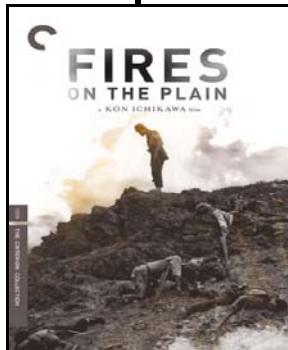
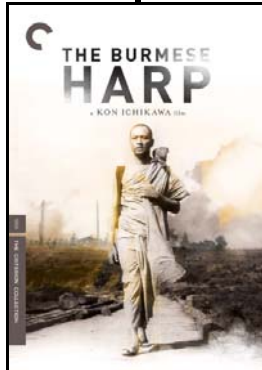
The narrative follows the soldier Tamara (**Eija Funakoshi**) through the jungles after his platoon has been destroyed by the enemy. In *Burma*, the corpses littering the landscape remind Mizushima of the impermanence of life on Earth and are a key component in his Buddhist conversion. In *Fires*, corpses serve a much more practical purpose as Tamara's platoon resorts to cannibalism. Indeed, *Fires on the Plain* is about the grotesque sacrifices that survival in war entails. In contrast to the lyrical and more meditative *Harp of Burma*, *Fires on the Plain* is full of expressionistic touches – quick cuts, close-ups and sharply drawn battle sequences. The ominous volcano that hovers over much of the film is a fitting metaphor for the hell of war.

As usual, Criterion's transfers are made from pristine newly-restored prints. Both DVDs contain informative bonus material, including interviews with film scholar Donald Ritchie and the director himself (still working at the age of 92). Ritchie's interviews are especially illuminative, as he mentions the taboo nature of the war in present-day Japan.

Ichikawa's focus is on the human costs of war, and he avoids the jingoistic nationalism of Hollywood films of the same time period. It is this very notion that some right-wing elements find offensive – the war and Japan's responsibilities are anathema to contemporary political sensibilities. Neither film could find studio backing today. In his interview, Ichikawa mentions his first-hand account of witnessing the devastation of Hiroshima and how that memory aesthetically influenced the films.

Criterion has provided a great service to film buffs with these two releases by recording Ichikawa, for he rarely gives interviews. In addition to his wartime memories, Ichikawa relates his filming methods and the process of adapting literary works. Nearly all of his major films were based on works by great Japanese writers and he worked closely with his wife, Natto Wada, who served as his screenwriter.

Hopefully, Criterion will continue to release his works in the U.S. along with those of all the other great filmmakers from Japan's golden age.



The April "FUN OF OUR LIVES" Issue TOP 13!

As JET alums, one of the most fun things about our lives in Japan was, of course, *hanami*. A time to get together, eat together, drink together, sing together and ... drink together. And while we're appreciating the *wabi-sabi*-ness of *sakura* blossoms, we're apt to say various things, which leads us to ...

THE TOP 10 THINGS OVERHEARD AT JETAA NY HANAMI

10. "I have to disagree. I think Jenn could totally take Rob one-on-one in a Presidential Throwdown."
9. "No, I don't think the Naked Cowboy is a JET alum. Why do you ask?"
8. "Yo, Frankie! Under da cherry blossoms I ain't even feel like I'm in Brooklyn!"
7. "My back hurts, Rob. When did you say this tradition of carrying the new President on a palanquin to the Botanical Gardens got started?"
6. "Fabulous bag! Is that a Jetaany?"
5. "Jenna Bush? Yeah, I think I saw her passed out under the cherry blossoms."
4. "Thanks for the *onigiri*. And the Sour Patch Kids aren't a bad substitute for the *umeboshi*."
3. "Put your *kimono* back on! You want everyone to see you in the JETAANY Society Page?"
2. "I swear I'll pay you back for all the booz, as soon as I get my Sake Scholarship money."
1. "Takenoko! Takenoko! No-ki-ki!"



("JETAANY Society" continued from page 10)

son, and JET alum couple **Nancy and Brian DeBroka**, whose son just turned six months... February 17 also saw the *kekkonshiki* of Newsletter editor **Steven Horowitz** to his beloved **Wynne "the" Wu** on the eve of Chinese New Year. *Mazel tov gozaimashita!* Back on the international social circuit, **Prez Jenn** hopped the Pacific Pond to Japan in February where she lent advice to soon-to-be alum at the **JET Returnees Conference** in **Yokohama**. Meanwhile, former Prez **Shannan Spisak** trotted out west in her capacity as **JETAA USA International Rep** to accept an award for commitment to global education on behalf of JETAA USA from the **Japanese American National Museum** at its 20th anniversary gala. (To put the award in perspective, the other two recipients were the **Nippon Keidanren** and the **Nippon Foundation**.) And in one of those strange twists of fate, while hobnobbing with *erai no hitos* including **Senator Daniel Inoue**, former **Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta**, and former **Starship Enterprise** officer **George Takei**, Shannan met (of all people) **Social Chair Monica Yuki's okaasan**, who was proud as only an *okaasan* could be about her daughter being JETAA NY's new



My boss, your Newsletter editor, and his lovely new wife.

social chair! Nice to see JET still makes the world a small village at times... And on April 27 new Prez **Rob** and new Secretary **Carol** will be in D.C. to meet with **Prime Minister Abe** for unspecified reasons. Not a bad way to kick off the term... **Kool Kat**: While Jenn was learnin' the yung'uns in Yokohama, our lovely former **Veep Kat Barnas** slipped back to Japan for some R&R and, thanks to the hospitality of "temporarily"-in-Tokyo JET alum **Ben Lang** (proselytizer of the *Takenoko-no-ki-ki* drinking game), sipped sake in the literally cool **Ice Bar** in Tokyo, where everything, including the glasses, are made of ice. Scoping it out for the next Jetaany Happy Hour, I believe.... That's all for this issue, *mis tomodachis*. Time to stop reading and go commune with the cherry blossoms. And

lastly, we look forward to visiting **Aharen-san** in Okinawa one of these days, but the only thing really left to say for now, of course, is.... *Takenoko, takenoko, no-ki-ki!!!*

-Yoku Shittetru



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