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Author(s)	Richard Springer
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MacArthur's Children Reflects on America's Influence Upon Japan

By RICHARD SPRINGER

MacArthur's Children does what the very best Japanese films do -- it takes a transitional period of Japanese history, shows how the social and political forces irrevocably cause the change, and in the process makes one feel sad for the society that ends.

In Kurosawa's Seven Samurai, for example, the seven masterless warriors are caught up in a transitional period of Japanese history. Guns have been introduced into Japan and they make even the greatest swordsman, the quiet and most reliable of the seven, totally helpless against the gun. Kurosawa in understated terms, makes the audience feel the sadness at the passing of an era.

In MacArthur's Children, director Masahiro Shinoda (Double Suicide, The Ballad of Orin, Demon Pond) and scriptwriter Tsutomu Tamura show the drastic changes that took place immediately after World War II, when General Douglas MacArthur and the American army occupied Japan. Shinoda wisely doesn't hammer his message home, but one can feel with him a sadness as the almost childlike life on one of Japan's small islands is jolted into the post-war era by a pervasive American influence.

Shinoda was in San Francisco several weeks ago and he explained several changes he and Tamura made in adapting the film from a novel by Yu Aku. Shinoda explained that the title of his film came from the cover design of Aku's novel. The actual title of the book can mean either "Emperor's Children" or "Fatherless Children," he said.

"I saw the book sitting on a shelf," said Shinoda, "and I thought it was a funny title. I saw the design -- a picture of MacArthur and some children and I knew the book was about MacArthur's children even without reading it. I was already constructing a plot before even reading the book."

In an interview in the May issue of American Film magazine, Shinoda is asked the question: "How do you draw a distinction between emotional or sentimental and the melodramatic? How do you make something emotional without making it melodramatic?"

Shinoda answers, "The way to do that is to keep the plot from centering too much on the main character, but give each character in the film his own story. So you can look at this film (MacArthur's Children) from the point of view of the Admiral, or if you look at it from the teacher Komako's point of view, you can understand what kind of impact America had on Japanese education.

"What I most wanted to do with this film was to shoot that school ground. And I wanted to do it from the vantage point of the corridor that connects the classrooms. After receiving your training in the classroom, you come out and feel the wind or the rain in that corridor. It's kind of melancholy that you feel in the break before having to go back for more. Sidney Lumet has a film called A View From the Bridge, and maybe that title expresses the vantage point of the whole film. My film has its vantage point, too, its views 'from something.'

When Japan lost the war, Shinoda was only fifteen years old, several years older than most of the children portrayed in MacArthur's Children. "I had been taught not to become a prisoner," Shinoda told East West. I had been taught to do hari kiri properly. For me at that time the war was a real tragedy. My mind became Americanized much later than the children in the film."

Shinoda said that MacArthur's children are now "all in their 40's, selling cars to the United States. Americans taught us how to sell automobiles. That was the point of the film, really. I wanted to show how we became MacArthur's children."

The film is a fascinating study of how the American occupation and its aftermath changed Japan and its people -- particularly the children. It is a view -- sometimes funny and sometimes bittersweet -- from a school corridor of the small town life of one's youth disappearing except in memories. MacArthur's Children is the best film from Japan since Family Game and Muddy River.



Saburo (Yoshiyuki Omori) and Ryuta (Takaya Yamauchi) are fifth-grade schoolboys determined to keep American occupation forces from landing on their homeland in "MacArthur's Children." □