

Japanese director gives Yakuza brothers his trade mark blues

When cult Japanese director/writer/actor Takeshi Kitano decided to shoot his first film in America, it was not surprising that he had cinematographer Katsumi Yanagijima at his side given that they had already shot six films together. *Brother* continues Kitano's trade mark exploration of the crime world. It is also a good example of the filmmaker's preferred dispassionate visual style – often referred to as "Kitano blue" – although it nearly wasn't. Kitano was so impressed with the vivid colours of Los Angeles streets and the sky overhead that he considered eliminating his usual cool blue tone. But in the end he decided not to overturn the decision, made at the planning stage, to transpose the techniques used in Japan.

Brother's story centres on the Yakuza gangster Yamamoto, who flees to the US in search of his brother after his crime family is annihilated in a Tokyo gang war. Despite being surrounded by an unfamiliar culture, he becomes engaged in a violent struggle to take over LA's downtown drug trade. Kitano, who goes by the name Takeshi "Beat" Kitano when working

as an actor, plays Yamamoto — he began his career as half of a comic duo.

Arthouse distributor Sony Picture Classics acquired US and Canadian rights halfway into the film's seven-week US shoot from sales agent Hanway Films, although the film is being sold in

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South-East Asia by Office Kitano of Japan. It was produced in a joint venture between Office Kitano and Hanway's sister company, the UK-based The Recorded Picture Company. It had its world premiere at the 57th Venice International Film Festival in September 2000 and Sony is planning for a US release in mid-2001.

Brother includes flashback sequences shot over two weeks in Japan, but most of the story is told in English. After extensive testing,



▲ A scene from *Brother*.



▲ DP Katsumi Yanagijima.

Yanagijima chose Kodak Vision 320T 5277 as the main film stock. He had never used it previously but wanted a softer look than usual. He also decided to use the Vision Premier print stock and was very pleased with the combination. A small amount of Eastman EXR 100T film 5248 was ordered in for the daylight scenes. About 60% of the film was shot indoors and 40% outdoors.

"It was a very good looking combination that provided a slightly tender tone while having certain contrast," Yanagijima said. "The principal camera was an ARRI 535B which I have used many times and find reliable. During high speed shooting, I used two-camera set-ups with an ARRI 3 for the high speed ratio and the 535B for the normal speed ratio. I also had a Moviecam Compact, which I wanted to use all the time because they are not available in Japan. Although I was a little anxious about the noise, I was impressed at how the camera was very easy to use outdoors."

Another piece of hardware that Yanagijima had not used before was the Revolution Lens, which he found very useful for shooting in enclosed spaces such as cars. "The lens itself bends, which meant I could set my camera on the passenger seat, and shoot the driver directly from the front without having to go through the window. This choice was made on the suggestion of Akihiko Nihonmatsu who acted as the first assistant. He is the only Japanese DP who has joined the union in America."

Key grip Hiro Kakuhari was also invaluable on the shoot because he too was accustomed to working in America. Yanagijima also used the Cooke S4 lens, which he found to have very good sharpness and quality without distortion. Standard light balancing filters and HMI



▼ Director Takeshi Kitano (holding camera grip) and DP Katsumi Yanagijima ("Jimmy" cap).

lighting were used, with space lights sometimes employed for the indoor scenes.

Having heard much about the American way of working, Yanagijima was generally impressed as a result of his experience. The cordial relations with the local police helped the shoot run smoothly, for example. But one thing he did find bewildering was the difference in the way the dailies are processed in Japan compared to the US. He was accustomed to the daily prints being very close to the final result, whereas he was unable to judge that the overall look was on track from those that came out of the LA



laboratory as they were processed using one light timing. As a result, all the daily prints were redone in Japan.

Yanagijima worked with Kitano on **Kikijuro**, which was chosen in official competition at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1999. Kitano also directed **Hana-Bi**, which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1997. It is these two films that are Kitano's best-known films internationally. 

▲ *Director Takeshi Kitano (left) and DP Katsumi Yanagijima (right).*

Data File

Brother

Producers

**Masayuki Mori,
Jeremy Thomas**

Director/writer

Takeshi Kitano

Director of Photography

Katsumi Yanagijima, JSC

Production Company

Kitano Office

**The Recorded Picture
Company**

Katsumi Yanagijima, JSC

Japanese DP Katsumi Yanagijima has 25 feature credits to his name, seven of which were directed by Takeshi Kitano, who also stars in most of the films he writes and directs. Yanagijima learnt his craft on the job, rather than at a film school, principally for 10 years while working as an assistant at Mifune Production, the company owned by the famous actor Toshiro Mifune. He is currently shooting a comedy about baseball directed by Kazuki Omori. One of those he's been pointing his camera at has been Japanese professional baseball player Ichiro Suzuki who moves to the Seattle Mariners this year.