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The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 serves as an information hub for foreign visitors who are interested in experiencing "The Beauty and the Spirit of Japan."

Experience movie magic up close at Toei Kyoto Studio Park



Actor Ken Watanabe in the *jidaigeki* (period piece) film "Kobikicho no Adauchi"
SAYAKO NAGAI, SHINCHOSHA / SAMURAI VENGEANCE FILM PARTNERS

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Step into the world of Toei Studios Kyoto, where Japan's samurai period dramas are made

Studio celebrates 100 years of historic filmmaking by inviting audiences into the past



The daimyo procession scene from "Kobikicho no Adauchi" is filmed at Toei Kyoto Studio Park.

The late Seizo Fukumoto, famed for dying in countless period dramas, including "The Last Samurai," was a star performer at Toei Kyoto Studio Park.



An aerial photo of Toei Studios Kyoto in the Uzumasa district of Kyoto in 1958

Maiko Muraoka
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The Uzumasa district of Kyoto is iconic in the history of Japanese cinema as a key filming location for *jidaigeki* (period dramas). Many renowned works in this genre have been produced here.

"Rashomon," the highly influential 1950 classic directed by Akira Kurosawa, is a peak example of the genre. It was filmed in Uzumasa and won the Grand Prix at the Venice International Film Festival the following year.

Toei Studios Kyoto, which has made over 2,000 *jidaigeki* since its founding in 1951, has played a critical role in the success of these movies, with "Bushido Zankoku Monogatari" (also known as "Bushido Samurai Saga") one of its shining examples. Filmed in Uzumasa and released in 1963, it won the Golden Bear award at the 13th Berlin International Film Festival. Both of these films remain appreciated for their impact and artistic value today.

Toei Studios Kyoto was also one of the filming locations for the Oscar-nominated 2025 blockbuster "Kokuho," which depicts the world of kabuki.

On Feb. 27, Toei will release "Kobikicho no Adauchi," starring Tasuku Emoto with Ken Watanabe. This drama set in the Edo Period (1603 to 1868) is about unraveling the mystery behind an act of revenge.

Toei Kyoto Studio Park Director Ken Takahashi said these period dramas stand out for their thematic diversity when compared with similar works from other countries. In a recent interview with The Japan Times, Takahashi said Japan's dramas have evolved beyond their traditional ethical or mythical storylines to incorporate other storytelling elements, such as comedy, eroticism, horror and social commentary, that remain popular today.

Renovation aimed at new experiences

Toei Studios Kyoto, which has supported the genre through its ups and downs, will celebrate the 100th anniversary of its studio lot in Uzumasa, which first opened as Bantsuma Uzumasa Production in 1926.

The adjacent theme park, Toei Kyoto Studio Park, was created to let the general public view live-action shoots and marked its 50th anniversary last year.

Japanese period dramas have incredibly diverse themes, incorporating elements of comedy, eroticism, horror and social commentary into their narratives.

A century ago, *jidaigeki* were enjoying their golden age. After World War II, however, as television began to proliferate, visual entertainment gradually began shifting to the new broadcasting technology.

By the 1970s, *jidaigeki* were being broadcast on TV every day, which is one reason why the genre is so diverse. Many Japanese fondly remember gathering around the TV with their families to watch them.

At the same time, the theme park's efforts to showcase the filming

process were proving popular.

Following an industry lull in the 2000s, *jidaigeki* have gained greater international recognition, especially in the West, with foreign filmmakers coming to Japan to produce them, demonstrating the genre's recovery and expansion.

Amid a succession of anniversary years, the theme park has been undergoing a full but

Continued on page B3 →



Filming is shown in progress at Toei Studios Kyoto, one of the oldest active movie studios in Japan.

Toei Kyoto Studio Park

Hours

10 a.m. - 9 p.m.

Tickets

¥2,800 for adults, ¥1,600 for children over 3 years old. Group and disability discounts available.

Access

About 15 minutes from Kyoto Station to Uzumasa Station, followed by a 15-minute walk.

Address

10 Uzumasa Higashichiocho, Ukyo-ku, Kyoto-shi

Details may change. For the latest information, visit:



→ Continued from page B2

methodical renovation without closing its doors.

Plans to introduce new content and attractions for the park's renewal have been in the works since fiscal 2024, with financial and other support provided by the Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 — a state initiative run by the Japan Arts Council.

The first phase of the renovated areas and new attractions will open on March 28, and the park will be officially renamed Uzumasa Kyoto Village, after the district where it stands. Under the new concept "Step into the world of Edo Period Kyoto," the village will feature a realistic re-creation of Edo Period townscapes that visitors can enjoy strolling through in rental kimono. In addition, the park's closing time will be extended to 9 p.m. from 5 p.m.

"We will also offer cultural activities such as tea ceremonies, ikebana, noh and kyogen," said Keiichiro Minamida, a producer at the park. New features will include stores where visitors can experience Japanese food, including traditional products made by some of the most venerable names in the industry.

A spellbinding atmosphere

In jidaigeki, the actors' deportment and gestures are crucial elements.

"Jidaigeki actors receive thorough instruction on *shosa* (how to carry and conduct oneself)," Minamida said, explaining that this is what gives every small gesture — standing, sitting, touching or lifting objects — a special nuance. He said the actors' movements have the power to make the atmosphere on set special even when they are not filming a scene. In this way, Minamida said, the park aims to offer an experience where one can enjoy the aesthetics of a jidaigeki performance simply by being present with the actors.

Minamida said that, just as theme parks create experiential value when different elements work together to create excitement, "a good movie is made when the power of the filming location, the power of the actors and the power of the script are skillfully intertwined." The village will precisely embody this combination of elements.

"We hope visitors from overseas will fully

immerse themselves in the open movie sets — whether as daimyo, ninja, samurai, geisha, or *oiran* (courtesans) — interact with jidaigeki actors and enjoy eating udon, yakitori and more," Takahashi said.

In recent years, the spread of social media has made it increasingly difficult to control information on new dramas before their official release, leading to situations where public access had to be restricted.

But with these big anniversaries coming up, Minamida said the studio is keen to restore public access.

"We want visitors to feel the tension and energy of the actors, directors and staff, and the energy of everyone involved in the production. We want to show how movies and dramas are made. Now that we are celebrating milestone anniversaries, we are actively exploring ways to allow visitors to feel these things again."

The sense of season is one of the notable advantages of using an open-air set. "If you look up, there is the same sun shining as it did a thousand years ago," Minamida said.

Walking through the streets set in the Edo Period 200 years ago, one can imagine how people lived amid the changing seasons.

"When rain falls, a sense of serene loneliness envelops the townscape, and the sight of snow falling softly also has its own charm. The human stories that unfold here possess authenticity. What is being created here is not a lie, but an ideal. We hope visitors will weave their own stories here, created only by themselves and the

people they come with," Minamida said.

Even with the advent of technologies like computer-generated imagery, Takahashi believes that filming in real environments remains the first choice for producers because it affects actors' performances and creates an atmosphere that cannot be achieved in a virtual world. He also emphasized that the focus should always be on creating a compelling story.

"I don't think audiences would watch films just because they're period pieces — they watch them because the stories set in the past are genuinely interesting." He also said the power of jidaigeki lies in its ability to convey the very essence of societal events in their archetypal form.

Inviting global collaboration

The Kyoto Historica International Film Festival, which Takahashi directs, attracts many foreign participants every year. About 90% of this year's nearly 400 applicants for the Kyoto Filmmakers Lab — a workshop for emerging filmmakers organized by the festival's Executive Committee — are from overseas. One workshop participant went on to direct Episode 8 of the American TV series "Shogun," set in 1600s Japan.

This workshop involves shooting short films using open sets. Among the participants are filmmakers who have already built their careers overseas. Takahashi said these workshops have given rise to fresh collaborations, such as Japanese actors performing stories based on foreign folk tales with an Edo-style spin.

Takahashi stated that global interest in producing films set in Japan or based on Japanese stories is growing, explaining that over the past few years, efforts to invite overseas production companies to shoot films in Japan have begun to take shape.

To further expand this, Takahashi said that film's status as both an industry and a cultural asset needs to be raised. This can be done by focusing on building more infrastructure and strengthening film education in Japan, he said. Citing the renewed success of "Shogun," he expressed hope that this trend will expand worldwide in the future.

The number of foreign visitors to Toei Kyoto Studio Park has also increased. Minamida emphasized that the park will enhance efforts to respond to inquiries individually while further disseminating information on its website and social media accounts.

"However, what truly matters more than language is our hospitality mindset when welcoming our visitors," he said.

Drawing more attention to jidaigeki will not only contribute to its sustainability, but also lead to the preservation of Japanese culture. "We are exhibiting cultural experiences, expecting all visitors to be part of the exhibit," Takahashi said.

In addition to the attractions offered year-round, the park holds seasonal events based on particular elements of Japanese culture. A *yokai* (supernatural beings) festival titled Kai-Kai Yokai Matsuri was a big hit last autumn. Minamida described the event as a Japanese-style Halloween and expressed hope this would become an annual tradition.

Minamida said that films are a mirror reflecting the times. "We want to offer heartwarming, energizing and refreshing experiences that enable visitors to feel the energy and discover what they might be missing," he said.

Ken Takahashi, director, Toei Kyoto Studio Park Co.

Takahashi was born in Tokyo in 1964 and joined Toei in 1987. He has worked on about 800 period dramas, including "Abarenbo Shogun," and oversees international film festivals. He became the director in 2024.

Keiichiro Minamida, producer, Toei Kyoto Studio Park

Minamida was born in Hyogo in 1969 and has dedicated his career to theme park management. Since 2025, he has led innovative projects like the Kai-Kai Yokai Matsuri. He specializes in blending Kyoto's history with immersive entertainment to create unique experiences for global visitors.



On peak nights of the Kai-Kai Yokai Matsuri's night parade, nearly 100 different yokai characters march through the park.



Producer Keiichiro Minamida (left) and Director Ken Takahashi pose on an open set at Toei Kyoto Studio Park. TAKAO OHTA

INFORMATION

NEW WAYS TO ENGAGE ART AND POP CULTURE

Immerse yourself in the world of the globally popular manga and anime "Attack on Titan" in the hometown of its creator. Experience Japan's most iconic artworks through digital technology. Embrace the creativity of tanka and Japanese

illustrations and let them move you. At these events and others across the country, visitors can discover and enjoy Japanese art and culture, both traditional and modern, from exciting new angles.

Augmented art experiences

The "Augmented Experience of Japanese Art" project connects two exhibitions, allowing art lovers to see renowned spring-themed masterpieces both in their original form and as reimagined through immersive multimedia installations. The first is "The Dynamics of Detail," which begins Feb. 25 at the Nihombashi Mitsukoshi Main Store. This will feature video and sound installations inspired by works from the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (MOMAT). Using cutting-edge technologies, the installations generate

sensory experiences that expand how audiences can engage with art. Its main piece, inspired by Atomi Gyokushi's "Scroll of Cherry Blossoms," creates an immersive space where the petals and branches of Atomi's delicate brushwork unfold before viewers' eyes. The original works, including "Scroll of Cherry Blossoms," will be shown at the second exhibition, Spring Festival in the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, from March 13.

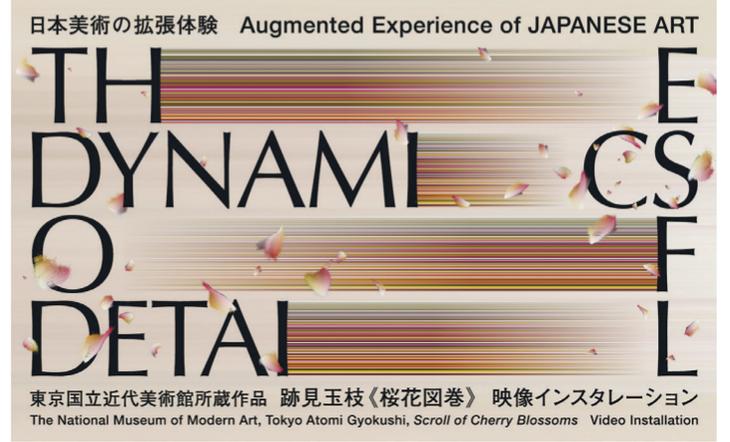
"The Dynamics of Detail"

Event period: Feb. 25 to March 2
Venue: Nihombashi Mitsukoshi Main Store, Main Building, 1F Central Hall
Address: 1-4-1 Nihonbashi Muromachi, Chuo-ku, Tokyo
Fee: Free



Spring Festival in MOMAT

Event period: March 13 to April 12
Address: 3-1 Kitanomaru Koen, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo
Fees: ¥500 for adults, ¥250 for college students, free for high schoolers, seniors and others (see website for details)



'Attack on Titan' festival

"Attack on Titan in Hita Fest" will be taking place in Hita, Oita Prefecture, until March 1 — transforming the hometown of Hajime Isayama, the artist behind "Attack on Titan," into an immersive adventure with themed events, exhibitions, a treasure hunt, a special appearance by the anime's voice actors and more. In "Real Treasure Hunting: Operation Hidden Code Investigation," participants can explore the city's Mamedamachi district and other nearby areas to search for hidden

clues for this puzzle-solving adventure. A talk show featuring the TV anime cast will take place March 1 at the Patria Hita cultural center. The Attack on Titan in Hita Museum and Annex will also hold special exhibitions through March 31. An overnight Commemorative Bus Tour on Feb. 28 and March 1 will include tickets to the talk show, treasure hunt and other event venues, including the museums and the Oyama Dam.

Event period: Until March 1; museum exhibitions end March 31.
Venue: Throughout the city. Tickets for Real Treasure Hunting available at the Hita City Tourist Information Center, the Titan in Hita Cafe and the Tenryo Hita Museum.
Fees: "Real Treasure Hunting": ¥3,850; talk show: ¥5,500; some events free.
Website: https://shingeki-hita.com/event_hita_fest.html



HAJIME ISAYAMA, KODANSHA LTD.

'The Landscape of Emotion'

As the traditional poetry form known as tanka experiences a boom in popularity on social media, "The Landscape of Emotion — In Tanka Poems and Illustration" exhibition is set to feature evocative pairings of art and poetry. The entire exhibition is curated by creative director and illustrator Mika Pikazo and is designed to highlight the shared essence of poetry and illustration: Both nurture emotions and transform them into creative expression. Using these thoughtful pairings, the show aims to provide viewers

with an opportunity to reconnect with their emotions. Before the exhibition, two contests were held. One was for illustrations inspired by four traditional tanka by renowned Japanese poets, such as Akiko Yosano and Hakushu Kitahara. The other was for tanka based on four illustrations by contemporary artists, including Mika Pikazo, who served as a judge for the contests with contemporary poet Hiro Sakakibara. The winning entries are included in the exhibition.

Event period: Feb. 13 to March 29
Venue: Kadokawa Culture Museum, 3rd Floor Exhibition Room, Tokorozawa Sakura Town
Address: 3-31-3, Higashi-Tokorozawa Wada, Tokorozawa-shi, Saitama Pref.
Fee: ¥1,800
Website: <https://tokorozawa-sakuratown.com/special/kanjyoten/en/>



MIKA PIKAZO

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