

9. My Tokyo Interviews

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Japan for me was a land of opportunity. Teaching English for thirty-five years provided me with lots of satisfaction, helping my students improve their language skills. Some even became friends.

Beyond that I was able to use my voice, dubbing Japanese movies and TV programmes with English. I spent countless hours in recording studios working with Japanese technicians. Also the country afforded me the chance to use my college journalism training as a writer and photographer to meet and interview movie stars and other celebrities who came to Tokyo from other countries.

One especially memorable young actor came from Australia to introduce his action movie to the Japanese press. My connections to the national English language newspaper, *The Daily Yomiuri*, gave me access to the press conference. After the Japanese reporters had asked their questions through an interpreter, I was able to get the actor off to one side and talk to him personally. To my surprise, he told me that he had recently signed a contract to make three movies in the United States.

“I don’t care if they don’t make the movies,” he said in his rich Australian accent as he rubbed his hands together briskly. “They gotta pay me!”

That young actor was Mel Gibson, star of *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* and the other Road Warrior films. He had been born in America, and it was said that his father had moved the family to Australia so that Mel’s older brother would not have to serve in the Vietnam War. Gibson returned to the US, lost his Ozzie accent and the rest is movie history.

One day I heard that Muhammad Ali, the world heavyweight boxing champion was in Tokyo. He had finished his career in the ring, but he was in Japan for a special gimmicky promotion. He was to fight the Brazilian-born Japanese professional wrestler, Antonio Inoki.

I managed to make a phone call to the champ's entourage at the Keio Plaza Hotel in the Shinjuku district of central Tokyo.

"Sorry," I was told. "He is going to meet the Prime Minister, Mr Miki. No private interviews."

This refusal did not deter me. I hurried over to the hotel, knowing that he would probably have to come out through the lobby. I might, at the very least, get a few photographs.

When I arrived there were Japanese photographers there and a group of Japanese boys waiting to get his autograph. Soon the ex-champion emerged from an elevator, and he began to sign autograph books and cards for the boys. I called for him to look up so I could take his photo, but he went on signing. Without missing a beat, I moved over beside him with my tape recorder.

I knew that he was to make a film of his life story, so I asked him who he would ask for advice about acting. That was a question he liked and he opened up:

"Charlton Heston ... Anthony Quinn ... Burt Lancaster ... and Sidney Poitier," he replied thoughtfully. Then he added, "But I don't need too many lessons, because I'm the world's greatest actor. Everything I've done has made me more famous than those stars. None of them is as famous as me."

Despite his legendary boasting, what he said might have been true in a way. He was not nicknamed 'The Greatest' for nothing.

After getting more comments on tape, I raced out to the limousine that was to take him to meet Mr Miki. As he got in he saw me and waved. I snapped my prize photo which illustrated an article that appeared in both *The Daily Yomiuri* and *Right On!* magazine in the US.

Sometimes, as a joke I tell people that among the celebrities I was able to meet, I shook the hand of Michelangelo who painted the huge picture of God touching the hand of Man on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome. If that does not produce a reaction, I add that I also shook the hand of Moses who parted the Red Sea.

How could that have happened? Years ago I interviewed Charlton Heston who came to Tokyo to introduce his film, *Midway*. Of course, he had starred in *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, as Michelangelo, and *The Ten Commandments*, as Moses. We talked about these films, but more importantly about his movie, *Midway*, that depicted the United States Navy battling the Japanese fleet in World War Two.

Perhaps the most unusual star that I met was the tough-guy actor, Robert Mitchum. He was in Japan to make a film about Japanese gangs entitled, *The Yakuza*, to be directed by Sydney Pollack. This time I was working for my friend, the movie company's publicity man, Hunt Downs. My job was to take photos that he would send around the world because the Japanese photographer spoke little English, but Hunt could talk directly to me and quickly.

The Japanese-American crew was on location in the Shibuya district of Tokyo, in front of the Pantheon Theatre building which no longer exists. At the lunch-break Robert Mitchum was taken to a restaurant by a Japanese assistant. I had had a light snack and was resting at the location when the burly actor returned alone. Seeing me, he complained,

"I'm the star of this picture but nobody's taking care of me. Where can I get a drink around here?"

I knew that there was a coffee shop around the corner and up a flight of stairs. I knew it served as a bar at night. So I offered to take him there.

"Lead the way," he said with a smile.

The coffee shop workers seemed to recognise him, so they were delighted to serve him.

"What's the best Japanese whisky?" he asked as we sat down at the bar. I told him that Suntory whisky had the best reputation among foreigners.

Over the course of the next half hour, he downed two large beakers of Suntory whisky on the rocks. Of course, he asked me to join him - "Call me Bob," he said - so I sipped a small glass of whisky to be sociable.

I had my tape recorder and it was no problem for Mitchum that it was running as we talked about the film and his past work. He was an engaging speaker. Somehow, to my great regret, I lost the tape in one of my moves in Tokyo.

Mitchum was known for his capacity for hard liquor. When we left to go back to work, he was able to move agilely down the stairs without missing a step. Back in front of the camera, he was rock steady and word perfect in his lines. Director Pollack did not seem to sense that he had been drinking. I thanked my lucky stars! I might have been fired for helping his main man to find whisky to wash down his lunch. I wondered later if Japanese office workers after a night out were able to get down those narrow stairs as steadily as Robert Mitchum had.

Another person I met was a young Japanese lady who was to become well known internationally some years later. She was the wife of an American teacher from the same English school I taught at. He moonlighted by dubbing movies with English on weekends, the same kind of thing I did. His wife accompanied him.

On one job late on a Sunday night after the American women had left the studio near Roppongi, the night-life centre of Tokyo, it was discovered that a small female part had somehow been overlooked. The Japanese wife, whose English was rather good, had been watching the recording closely and knew what to do, so she was asked to fill in. While I stood at my microphone, she worked alongside me at hers. After several rehearsals and a couple of 'takes', the recording was approved and she left with her husband.

That young man was Tony Cox, and not long after he took his wife to England. That was his big mistake. She met John Lennon and there was a divorce. That lady was Yoko Ono and she became Lennon's wife.

All in all, I came away from my years in Japan with many good memories.

I have numerous stories to tell to anyone who cares to listen. I wonder how many people can boast that they once worked with Yoko Ono, shook hands with 'Moses' and 'drank' lunch with movie star Bob Mitchum? With just a little stretching of the truth, I can!



“Where can I get a drink around here?”

Robert Mitchum gets some much-needed help from the writer.