Spaghetti Western served up in Japan

By MARK SCHILLING

In the late 1950s and early '60s, the Japanese studio Nikkatsu had great success with its "borderless action (mukokuseki action)" films. The best known was the nine-part "Wataridori (Birds of Passage)" series (1959-62) starring Akira Kobayashi as a drifter who has most of the accoutrements of a Western hero, including a horse, guitar and trusty bullwhip. He rides into a remote town or ranch, helps the locals fight various bad guys, wins the love of a local maiden (played in all but one episode by Ruriko Asaoka) and also gains an ally (always played by Joe Shishido) in one of the baddies.

Although these films were set in contemporary Japan, they had little to do with any known reality. Shishido told me his name for them was "miso Westerns" and he was proud of the fact they predate the far more famous spaghetti Westerns of Italy.

So Takashi Miike's new Eastern Western "Sukiyaki Western Django" has many local precedents, though he claims he drew his inspiration from those spaghetti Westerns (usually called "macaroni Westerns" here) that he watched as a boy with his father.

Shot almost entirely in English in Yamagata Prefecture, with a cast that includes Miike fan Quentin Tarantino, "Sukiyaki" is not one of Miike's cheapie genre pics for the video shelves. Instead, it is big-budget entertainment for the world market that masquerades as a wacky cult film — a strategy often used by Tarantino himself.

Both Miike and Tarantino, overpraised and overindulged for years, are...
now in the baroque phases of their careers, strenuously embellishing by-now familiar themes with ever more convoluted arabesques of cinematic referencing and auteurist posturing. I count myself as a fan of both — but I also think they have both reached an impasse, like aging rockers who jazz up their stage shows as vehicles for their decades-old riffs.

Not that all of Miike's riffs in "Sukiyaki" are stale. He and scriptwriter Masa Nakamura have mashed up the Western and samurai genres in ways clever, cool and eye-poppingly outrageous. In other words, exactly what you would expect from Miike. But the over-the-top gestures that once seemed so spontaneous — like a naughty 14-year-old dreaming up gruesome tortures — now often feel ponderous and arch.

The biggest miscalculation, however, was the decision to have the Japanese cast speak English — and not simple day-to-day conversational English either, but ornately colloquial dialogue that rolls out of monolingual mouths like someone reciting the Gettysburg Address while gargling water. Some in the cast, such as Kaori Momoi and Yusuke Iseya, rate fairly high on the intelligibility scale, but the overall effect is grating. Will this bother local audiences? Maybe. I would also be annoyed if I had to sit through a Hollywood remake of "Yojimbo," Akira Kurosawa's classic 1961 Eastern Western, with Brad Pitt emoting in mangled Edo Period Japanese.

"Sukiyaki" begins with a poncho-wearing cowpoke (Tarantino) fending off baddies with superhuman feats of cool, then enjoying a meal of — what else? — sukiyaki (a beef stew). Naturally, he has a story to tell (much of which the film relates in an extended flashback), about remnants of the warring Genji and Heike clans who, centuries after the climatic battle of Dannoura (1185), are living survival-of-the-fittest existences in the new Wild East. Then gold is discovered near a Heike town and a gold rush ensues. One day a gang of red-clad Heike toughs, lead by the bombastic Kiyomori (Koichi Sato), swagger into town; but instead of allying with their Heike brethren, the gang violently take over, while co-opting the craven sheriff (Teruyuki Kagawa). After the brutal murder of the elderly mayor (Renji Ishibashi), the townspeople flee.

Soon after, a white-wearing Genji gang appear on the scene and start a turf war with the Heike. The Genji leader is the dandyish but deadly Yoshitsune (Yusuke Iseya); among his followers are the buffoonish Benkei (Takaaki Ishibashi) and crossbow-wielding Yoichi (Masanobu Ando). (One of the film's more memorable stunts is Benkei blasting a melon-size hole through a surprised Heike gangster with a gun, followed by Yoichi zapping an arrow through the hole and into another opponent.)

Then a lone gunman (Hideaki Ito) rides into town and, after proving his
lethal worth to both sides, takes refuge in the general store of the feisty Ruriko (Momoi). She lives there with her grandson — the offspring of her Heike son, slaughtered by Kiyomori, and his Genji bride Shizuka (Yoshino Kimura), now the town prostitute. The boy, who witnessed his father's death and his mother's degradation, is mute. What miracle will make him speak again?

This is also the setup of "Yojimbo," as well as Sergio Leone's spaghetti Western remake "A Fistful of Dollars." But where Leone re-imagined Kurosawa's world in a Mexican nowhere, with Clint Eastwood creating a new flinty-eyed, take-no-prisoners definition of the Western hero, Miike is more intent on out-Tarantino-ing Tarantino in dreaming up blackly funny ways of dealing death and generally messing with audience minds.

The problem is, we've seen most of the gags before in other Miike pics, beginning with the hoariest of all — the grotesquely wounded character who doesn't realize he's dead meat until the camera draws back to reveal, say, the massive clock hand impaling him like a piece of yakitori (skewered chicken). Instead of laughing, I imagined the sweat of the prop guys as they labored to make an absurd effect look less than totally fake. Not good.

Unlike Tarantino, Miike also has a macho sentimental streak, expressed in "Sukiyaki" by the gunman's selfless championing of the traumatized boy, his much-abused mother and other decent townsfolk. But the operatic clowning undermines the drama.

By contrast, the "Wataridori" films look almost refreshingly naive. Kobayashi and Shishido would zing each other with snappy lines, show off their manly skills (bull whipping, gun twirling) and otherwise have fun with their absurd roles, but with youthful high spirits, not elaborately self-referential nudges and winks.

As for Clint at his cigarillo-chewing coolest, poor marble-mouthed Hideaki Ito doesn't begin to compare. But then, Clint had someone dub his Italian, didn't he?