

When the Cameras Came to Stay

When the television crew arrived it was snowing, blizzard proportions. “Perfect”, they said as they bailed out of the taxi, “just the winter mood we need”. The Osaka cabbie clearly didn’t share their enthusiasm. Having had to fiddle with tyre chains to get up the mountain he looked fretfully at the slushy mess splattered all over his black limousine. The animals revelled in it though: dogs tumbling and chasing each other through the drifts, the pony rolling in sheer excitement, then tearing around heels flying, the geese attempting to maintain a measure of dignity as they scooped beakfuls of snow over their feathers. A week later the crew’s enthusiasm was on the wane. Increasingly they chose to film inside near the fire, interviewing dogs, cats, me, almost anyone who arrived was instantly collared to be captured on film. I didn’t blame them as there was a better wind blowing outside. “When will the wretched snow melt?” they moaned, “when will spring arrive?” TV is an impatient media, it thinks it can conjure up seasons at whim. When they first approached me about making a documentary I felt I couldn’t afford to pass up the chance for a bit of free PR on the telly so I gave them free rein to film what they wanted. One hour of telly time means thirty hours of filming or two weeks on and off. They dogged my every move from sunrise to sundown, even into the night until they were almost part of the family. It’s more exhausting than one thinks having a camera breathing down one’s neck at every turn, one’s daily habits potentially becoming the focus of a million eyes.

What they originally came expecting to film and what they went away with was somewhat different. Certainly the 'Mutsugoro' touch was there, frolicking animals in a country setting. Those who see Mutsugoro's popular animal films are conned into thinking that keeping animals is easy. What the films don't explain is that there's a world of difference between accommodating a whole range of pets on a few hundred acres in Hokkaido and keeping a St. Bernard in a 2DK at the top of a high rise. Yet people strangely assume they can do this and then wonder why they have problems with their pet/s (and neighbours). Another question never answered in these films is what happens to all those cute baby animals once they grow up. Even with enough space, and, one assumes, help, there must be financial limitations. Six months after the popular film 'Koneko Monogatari' (A Kitten's Story) was released, the number of stray cats rose dramatically according to animal welfare workers. Everyone wanted the cute kitten they saw in the film but didn't like the full-grown cat it became half a year later. Animal films in Japan tend to appeal to people's emotions, dwelling overly on the happy cuddly aspects without touching on any of the underlying problems or the responsibility involved. Commercial networks of course aim to entertain, and sponsors back films that encourage consumers to spend more. If the finished documentary on this place doesn't get the complete message across it won't be for lack of trying. (Unfortunately by the time this appears in print the programme will have already been aired but it may yet be a candidate for the annual commercial TV documentary awards.)

I managed to convince the producer that all is not sweetness and light in the pet world and suggested that if they really wanted a rounded is it they should at least approach that den of canine demise, the Osaka Prefecture *hokensho* at Morinomiya. Their request was at first rejected by the Prefecture (not surprising since it's a thorn of shame in their side), but finally they agreed to let the cameras in and to be interviewed. Quite a coup. They'd had a mammoth clean up prior to our visit; i.e. killed off

most of the dogs the day before, hosed the floor clear of faeces, and replaced the dim lights with a glaring variety. But however much they tried they couldn't hide the expressions of those animals awaiting death, the wire nooses embedded in their necks, their bodies shivering from fear of further torture or from the hosing down they'd had to clean them up for our arrival. A lone puppy was crying pathetically in a cold little tiled cell – just a tiny blanket or a bit of newspaper would have given a measure of comfort, a humane touch, but when I mentioned it to the officials they just shrugged. No point in pampering the convicted.

We also trooped along to a shack on a mountain where a construction worker-of-sorts keeps about 20 dogs chained in pools of muck and mud. Some had makeshift kennels made out of old oil drums, angled so that when it rains the water seeps in. On the day of our visit the dogs are lying on ice inside. The place was bedlam; puppies from various litters of varying sizes tied hither and thither with bits of wire and string. "Totally against spaying – unnatural," he defiantly commented, arms akimbo. Instead he dumps the surplus on street corners hoping passersby will take them home. Yet he claims to be a 'dog lover'. At least it illustrated the futility of the Animal Protection Law in Japan and why millions of animals are killed every year (at taxpayers' expense) by local authorities.

There were brighter aspects to the filming. One was visit to St. Michael's School where the kids had used their ingenuity and energy to the full during their 'Good Neighbour Week' to raise a whole heap of money for the animals. A few of the lucky ones, winners of the raffle, will be coming here for an overnight stay to learn about keeping animals and to see how their money is being used.

The TV crew became impatient. Snow gave way to rain but that wasn't what they wanted either. The magnolia trees now in bud had still failed to bloom. So they gave up and decided to give nature a bit of a push. Arriving one day, they whisked a sprig of blossom purchased in downtown Osaka out of the taxi boot. With the house in the background

they dangled the blossom over the lens. They'd finally got what they wanted – instant spring.

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