

national

# Director uses organic process to tell rural communities' tales

## Locals engage in every stage of production

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Every person, town or village has a story to tell, whether they are tales of love and friendship or the tragedy of losing a loved one, and they all are interwoven into our lives in complex layers.

That is how movie director Hiroki Hayashi and his film production company, Fireworks, collaborated with residents in the city of Ena, Gifu Prefecture, to create the film "Furusato Gaeri" ("Going Home").

Hayashi's method for making movies is unique. He invites thousands of locals to participate in the creation process, ranging from casting them, using them as extras or involving them in fundraising and advertising activities, with the aim of revitalizing and developing the community.

"Whether it's relationships between people, regions or companies, we create the story that lies at the center, born through such connections," Hayashi said. "Our job is to visualize that story and to create an opportunity to make sure that many people can feel and experience it."

The process of making "Furusato Gaeri" began one hot summer day in August 2005 when Fireworks received a surprise visit by a couple of municipal officials from Ena seeking help.

The city, whose population stands at around 56,000, has undergone several mergers, the

most recent in 2004, as part of the central government's drive to slash the number of municipalities nationwide. The municipality of Ena now comprises 13 towns and villages, and the municipal officials said the city has been merged in name only. In reality, they said, there were few ties between the villages and towns.

"The Ena officials wanted to see if they could revitalize the area through filmmaking. They said that due to the mergers, Ena had become shaky," Hayashi recalled.

Fireworks' way of making movies does not prioritize the size of the budget or even the script. The process is about residents and their municipality, and what they wish to achieve through making a movie. Raising funds and writing a script come later.

So together with scriptwriter Munehiro Kuriyama, Hayashi repeatedly held workshops in Ena to interact with the locals, to understand their emotions and thoughts, and to come up with a project that would lead to their ultimate vision of the future.

After heated discussions and sometimes outright battles, they came up with a name for the film project — "Ena Kokoro no Gappai Purojekuto" ("The Mergers of Ena's Hearts Project").

"It is a completely different process from the usual way of making movies — we basically start from scratch and talk it through completely to see what kind of script matches their vision and story," Kuriyama said. "The people of Ena believe that this movie is theirs because we created it together from the beginning."

ductions in Japan, which are shown at cinemas nationwide at roughly the same time, Fireworks takes a "traveling screenings" approach, taking the movie to cities and towns interested in hosting it.

The first screening of "Furusato Gaeri" took place in April in Ena, and the film has since been shown at more than 100 venues all across the nation. This year the film is expected to be screened in Hokkaido and Okinawa.

Set in a fictitious village in Ena called Kurisato, the movie is about a young man who returns to his hometown after living in Tokyo for several years.

He struggles to rebuild the relationships he lost when he turned his back on the village and headed to the capital to pursue his dream of becoming a film director.

The movie depicts many fundamental problems affecting rural towns, including a rapidly aging society and young people leaving to find work in cities. It also focuses on internal conflict between the local men who have formed a volunteer fire brigade, and their wives, who consider it just an excuse by their husbands to gather at night for drinking sessions.

"If we try to create a film in this style halfway, it becomes one of those superficial, local PR movies. By digging deeply we always end up finding a comprehensive, global theme — we find ourselves hitting the magnetic core," Hayashi said.

The 37-year-old director from Saitama Prefecture spent his early childhood dreaming of becoming a doctor, to help cure his



Hiroki Hayashi

The process was long, according to Hayashi and Kuriyama, and there were various conflicting emotions among locals at some stages, including friction between some of the former townspeople who did not want to work together, or between some who opposed making a movie at a time of economic gloom.

In the end, it took 5½ years and about half of the municipality of Ena, as well as supporters nationwide such as college students and salaried men, to make the film. Participants in the project did everything from building the sets and collecting money to making fliers and advertising in the movie — as well as appearing in the movie.

"For us, what is most important is not what we create, but who we create it with," Kuriyama said.

Unlike big budget film pro-



Movie magic: Residents of Ena, Gifu Prefecture, along with college students, actors and Fireworks employees, suit up for a scene about the city's volunteer fire brigade for the movie "Furusato Gaeri." ©2011 FIREWORKS/NAKED INK/ENA FURUSATO FILM PRODUCTION COMMITTEE

But when I told my mother, she told me that it was not only medicine that could help people — that I could still reach out to others through filmmaking."

After the March disasters, Fireworks was asked by some towns that were badly hit by the tsunami and earthquake to create a film to help rebuild their communities, including Minamisemaru in Miyagi Prefecture.

Although still limited, Fireworks also has begun to hold screenings of "Furusato Gaeri" in disaster-hit areas.

"After moving from the disaster shelters to temporary housing, their communities were ripped apart. I think disaster-hit areas want to take the opportunity of the screening to recon-

nect and rebuild the communities," Hayashi said.

Kuriyama, the scriptwriter, has been traveling to disaster areas to screen "Furusato Gaeri" and to help volunteer projects that involve filming. He recalled meeting a man from Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture, who wanted to show the movie to the people of his hometown, which is near the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant.

"With tears running down his face, the man said that 'Furusato Gaeri' is the only movie that can reach out to nuclear disaster victims," Kuriyama said. "The people of Iwaki are still in the middle of deciding whether to leave or to stay. The environmental damage (from the disaster) is serious but so is breaking up relationships."

Every screening of "Furusato Gaeri" has led to discussions on the disaster because tsunami or nuclear accident could happen anywhere in Japan," Hayashi said.

The March 11 disaster is not just about the Tohoku region, it is a personal issue for all of us.