

# H O R R O R S: Film maker takes on a Japanese idiom

BY PATRICIA LAMKIN  
Special to Asia

Jason Cuadrado may call his first film, "Tales From the Dead," a J-Horror homage, but it gives a nostalgic nod to his other fascination, "The Twilight Zone." "Bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people. J-Horror works with the same themes, so they seem like a natural match," explained Cuadrado.

For the uninitiated, "J-Horror" is the abbreviated reference to Japanese horror films with their unique themes.

An anthology of four ghost stories, "Tales" is introduced by the character Leni Ito, who plays Tamika, a young medium who can hear and see the dead. The four tales are "Home Sweet Home," "Chalk," "The Dirty Business of Time" and "Shoko the Widow."

As the first film opens, the disgruntled wife, Shoko (Nikki Takei), goes out to get away from her disappointing husband Jiro (Hiro Abe). Tamika picks up the hitchhiking Shoko who has become stranded in a remote wooded area due to a flat tire. As they drive in the night to the next town, Tamika tells each of the tales, based on her personal involvement, or what the spirits have told her.

A spine-tingling, and engrossing drama, "Tales" foregoes the gratuitous gore and vio-

lence of low-budget horror films today. "I didn't personally approach this as a horror movie, or character," said actress Ito. Takei agreed. "What I liked about this script was in growing up in Japan, ghost stories are always a dark spirit with a grudge," she said, "but this is more about Karma."

In the first tale, "Home," Tamika and her sister Manami (Kiyoko Kamai), investigate a haunting at the home of a couple (Eiji Inoue and Masami). The couple has been celebrating the return of a troubled runaway son Kenji (Daisuke Tomita), found mysteriously paralyzed in a hospital, unable to even speak. As Tamika walks through the house, she "sees" that the previous owners were murdered there and are connected to the new residents by an ironic twist of fate.

With J-Horror, "you always walk in, and it seems like a detached haunting," Cuadrado explained. "Then as the story progresses, you realize there are people attached to the haunting, and the ghost is trying to say something, or get back at the person who caused it," he said.

But "Tales" can be as much about complex characters as it is about ghosts. For example, in "Shoko," a woman is pressured by a "widow's club" to kill her husband. "My character wanted to step up in her life to marry someone who is successful and it didn't happen," said Takei. "So she's not vicious,

or evil, but she's frustrated."

The four tales resemble the short narrative format of "Zone," but the hallmark feature is the framing story (Tamika and Shoko driving) shot in black and white, while the stories remain in color. Like Rod Serling, Tamika narrates with a resonating detachment, which Ito conveys disarmingly well by a creepiness that defies her youth.

In the Faustian tale, "Dirty Business," a suicidal man named Yoshi (Yutaka Takeuchi) meets a stranger who offers to buy moments of his time for large sums of money.

Almost all of the segment "was shot as if it were on stage," Cuadrado said, emulating the "Twilight Zone's" 1950s format. The classic story is balanced with gritty *film noir* acting from Takeuchi and Mark Ofuji as Ebisu, the Devil.

It's not just the innovative "J-Zone" blend, or A-film performances that make "Tales From the Dead" rise above the nihilistic chop and shock low-budget screamers that inundate audiences today. It's the character-driven, well-woven tales that are as much *film*

*noir* thriller as they are horror.

And they actually have a message. "The dead speak," says the film's tagline. I strongly suggest giving the dead of "Tales" a good listen.



Above: Jason Cuadrado (back to camera in baseball cap) prepares a scene for the movie. Left: Cuadrado and actress Sachiko Hayashi.

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## Cuadrado: A man with the right spirit(s)

Jason Cuadrado loves horror film of the Asian persuasion, especially the genre known as "J-Horror."

So he decided to write his own script in that vein, and as an ultimate homage, shoot the entire film in Japanese. The fact that he isn't Japanese, or can't speak a word of the language, didn't dissuade him.

Cuadrado squirreled away more than \$40,000 for his low-budget indie "Tales from the Dead" while working as a web designer. Using Craigslist, he found someone to translate his script into Japanese and posted for his cast.

By the January 2007 shoot date he had, "only 17 days to complete principal photography, a rapidly dwindling bank balance, a cast of thirty Japanese actors, and no translator on set," he said.

Most of the actors spoke English. But when they spoke their lines Cuadrado couldn't understand them. He humbly credits them for making everything work.

"I knew where they were by what they were doing," he said, and even found certain advantages to this. "When you write and direct you can get so locked in on your words and how they should sound. And I didn't have that," he said.

He told them he could only offer the direction and the story. "I knew that the authenticity would come from them. And they were amazing," he said.

Despite its contemporary name, J-Horror has its origins in Japan's Edo Period (1603-1868) in the ghostly folktales known as "kwaider," which

tell of vengeful, earth-bound ghosts called *yurei*.

Traditionally *yurei* are dressed in white – a burial practice still used in Japan today. Probably the most famous J-Horror *yurei* is the terrifying girl who comes out of the television set in the 1998 nail-biter "Ringu," (Ring) directed by Hideo Nakata. Other popular examples are "Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara" (Dark Water), and "Ju-On" (The Grudge). All of these have been remade in the United States with major female stars like Naomi Watts and Sarah Michelle Gellar.

While fear is universal, there are cultural differences between Japanese and American horror. With "American horror you spend so much of your film trying to convince people you've seen something, and everyone thinks you're crazy for like an hour," said Cuadrado. "In Japanese horror you would say, 'I saw a ghost' and they'd say, 'Of course you did. Let's see what it wants.'"

"We're just born with it, being Buddhists," said actress Ito. "We're just born with 'Oh, that's a spirit, and the spirits are always with you.' So it was kind of a natural thing for me to get into the role."

"Tales" will premiere at HBO's 2008 New York International Latino Film Festival, July 22-27.

For more about "Tales From the Dead," and future festival showings, visit [talesfromthedeath.com](http://talesfromthedeath.com).



From "Ju-on," or "The Grudge"