

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Pray for Japan

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We found filmmaker, entrepreneur and manga-guru **Stu Levy** getting ready for the March 14 nationwide screening of his feature documentary *Pray for Japan*, one year after Japan's devastating earthquake, tsunami and the aftermath.

Where were you last year on March 11 when the earthquake struck Japan?

I was in my Tokyo condo on a Skype call with Australia. My condo is on a high floor and when the earthquake hit, the entire building swayed like a small sailboat in the wind. At first I ignored the quake, thinking it would soon stop, and continued my call. But the shaking kept on and soon I heard loud banging from the other room. I excused myself from the call and ran into the living room to find my paintings literally slamming into the wall repeatedly. The building's loudspeaker announced for people to stay in their homes, and the elevators were shut down. Soon a major aftershock hit and the swaying and banging got worse. After a few minutes of being rocked around, things quieted down and I hopped online. While my cell phone couldn't get any reception, fortunately the Internet still worked. Facebook, Twitter and Skype became the main means of communication as I began to let everyone know I was fine and check on my friends and colleagues in Japan. Soon after that, we learned about the tsunami...

Why did you decide to make this film?

A few days after the earthquake, I was looking for a way to head up north to help. My friends connected me with a non-profit organization who was looking for a volunteer to help bring emergency provisions up to the devastated region. I jumped at the chance and soon was on a truck with gasoline, rice and vegetables. Up north, amidst the snow flurries, we delivered the provisions to a shelter of over 1000 victims huddled into a few large rooms with no electricity or gas to warm them. We built a small soup kitchen and the victims had their first hot meal. On my second volunteer trip, I met a local in Ishinomaki, on the Tohoku coast, who learned of my recent experiences in the film industry. He asked if I would make a documentary to show my unique perspective of the tragedy, and after giving it a bit of thought I agreed.



How did you actually make it? Must have been pretty difficult.

The most important issue to me was to not hinder the recover efforts. Going from a pair of hands moving boxes, carrying supplies and cooking food to simply holding a camera is actually quite depressing – you lose that sense of contribution. So, I committed to juggle my filming with volunteer efforts. My friend, who was operating the audio, and I were staying in Sendai, the main city in Tohoku, in a tiny room we were lucky to find. Every morning, we'd drive to the devastated regions on the coast, stuck in horrid traffic with mainly trucks and emergency vehicles, and when

we arrived we'd start filming various recovery activities. After a couple of filming hours, we'd put down our equipment and help with soup kitchens, or shoveling mud, or carrying supplies. Then we'd pick up our equipment and film again. We did this all day and much of the night, then drove back over an hour to our room – and transferred data into our computers. We only were able to sleep about 3 hours per night for the entire 5 week period. By the end of the stay, I was terribly sick and lost my voice – but still had to power through. The only encouragement was to think about the victims and their struggles – no matter how tough we had it, we were the fortunate ones. Thinking of them and their inner strength is what kept us going.

How did you put together the one-night-only screening on March 14, and what do you hope happens?

It took 6 months to edit the 50 hours of raw footage and put together the many fine details such as Shinya Mizoguchi's gorgeous score, the moving songs of Okuda Tamio and M's Japan Orchestra, the beautiful animation, color grading, and sound mixing, but by then the world had forgotten about the Tohoku tsunami and the 20,000 people lost in this tragedy. Our world moves so fast that yesterday's tragedy quickly becomes a faded memory. As a result, the immediate reaction from film festivals and distributors was one of indifference – a Japanese-language documentary interviewing tsunami victims and volunteers lack immediacy and urgency while not being artsy enough to qualify as an art film. Fortunately, AMC Theatres saw the real theme of *Pray for Japan*: a story about people in the face of disaster working together to overcome insurmountable challenges. These are real people who were forced to deal with a tragedy that any of us could theoretically experience – and listening to their stories and how they fought is truly inspirational. So, AMC and I agreed to put the film into theaters nationwide to honor the one-year anniversary of the tragedy. As the word is getting out, people from all over the world are inquiring, wanting to see the film, wanting to screen it. AMC will be extending the run in New York and Los Angeles as well. My hope is that the film can serve as inspiration to people around the world – so that everyone can feel empowered by the actions of these everyday heroes, just like I was on the ground in Tohoku.

You've lived in Japan and the US, and you're largely responsible for bringing manga to American audiences. What manga are you into right now?



I have always loved stories, especially when accompanied by visuals. When I first discovered manga in Japan many years ago, I felt like I was reading a film – and as a reader you can control the experience. You can read voraciously or intermittently, in bed all night long or at a café while sipping tea. The stories are compelling and the experience is intimate. Turning a hobby into a business though changes the experience, so I can't sit down and read manga for fun like I did in the pre-TOKYOPOP days. But I tend to like manga that's a bit off the beaten path. When I do get a chance to read nowadays, I've been enjoying a manga called *Thermae Romae*, about an ancient Roman bath architect who magically warps to modern Japan and learns about its bath culture, bringing it back to Rome. It's fun to see the fantastical culture clash that occurs, which, as a foreigner in Japan, is actually quite relatable. In *Pray for Japan* there's a scene that shows how the *jieitai* (self-defense forces) built temporary hot baths for the victims in Tohoku – both this manga and that real-life encounter really emphasize to me the importance in life of something as seemingly mundane as a hot bath.

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