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Ken Watanabe is back from a year of self-imposed retirement after his acclaimed roles in Last Samurai and Letters from Iwo Jima. He talks about his new movie project, his life out of the limelight and the dangers of Asian stereotypes.

Ken Watanabe's latest film project opens with an image of an Arctic bear resurfacing into the brilliant spring sunlight after months living underground. It's tempting to see the scene as a metaphor for a career that has alternated between stretches of intense, highly acclaimed work and long periods of hibernation.

The 48-year-old was famously forced into semi-retirement by a leukemia diagnosis in 1989 just two years after the NHK samurai series Dokuganryu Masamune launched him into the acting firmament. He fought the disease into remission but it returned in 1994, leaving a gaping, five-year hole in his resume.

He is now reemerging, blinking in the media spotlight after another year away from the cameras – this time self-imposed -- following a string of high-profile Hollywood performances that have made him perhaps the best known, most respected Asian actor on the planet.
In The Last Samurai (2003), Memoirs of a Geisha (2005) and Letters from Iwo Jima (2006), Watanabe brought charisma and depth to roles that in less capable hands were ripe for stereotype: a recalcitrant Meiji-era warrior, a middle-aged businessman and the doomed World War Two general Tadamichi Kuribayashi.

The Last Samurai

His rich, soulful turn in Edward Zwick's Bushido sword-fest outshone Hollywood's brightest star, Tom Cruise, and earned him an Oscar nomination for best supporting actor. He is the heart and soul of Letters, a movie widely dubbed a masterpiece. Even his phoned-in performance in the exquisitely packaged but slight Memoirs, and a cameo in Batman Returns were noted by critics.

Letters from Iwo Jima

All of which made his next career move appear odd. Watanabe returned to Japan to make Memories of Tomorrow, a grueling, distinctly un-Hollywood drama about a Salary-man's descent into Alzheimer's disease. He briefly made the headlines again when he married actress Kaho Minami. But since then, public sightings have been as rare as that Arctic bear. Where has he been?

"How can I explain this?" says the 48-year-old Niigata native as he struggles for words. "With Letters, then Memories, I reached a sort of turning point in my acting. I had poured so much of myself into those movies and I really had no idea where to go from there. I was of course offered scripts but nothing that moved me at all in the same way. A lot of people advised me to go ahead and make a movie anyway. But in the end I didn't make one for nearly a year."

Tanned, fit and impeccably turned out in a tailored Italian suit for our interview in a central Tokyo hotel, the time off seems to have done him the world of good. "I said to my wife, 'I've haven't done anything in a year, I wonder if it's okay,'" he recalls, smiling. "But she said

'What are you talking about, you're living your life.' And it was a kind of relief to realize that this is what life is: spending time with your family and other normal things."

The project that brings him back from hibernation is Planet Earth by BBC documentary maker Alastair Fothergill, the creative force behind the huge worldwide hit Deep Blue. A filmic plea to rescue the dying planet from environmental destruction, Earth opens with a haunting shot of that polar bear searching for footing on melting ice. Watanabe, who narrates the movie, recalls what he saw when he spent a month in the Arctic.

"The first dawn after winter up there is supposed to be mid-February but the sun appeared to rise two weeks earlier. When I asked local people about it they said 'there have been huge changes here in the last few years.' The weather is changing here too. So when I was asked to do the narration and I thought I've got to do this. It's so important."

"I mean, mankind has lived for such a short time on the planet, and maybe we don't have much longer to go. But we can still help by doing even small things. Use water and electricity carefully, for example."

It's a long way from the Hollywood coalface, but Watanabe thinks the older he gets the more inclined he is to seek out work that "says something" to the audience. He denies, though, that stardom has turned him against the lure of Big Movies. "Not at all," he says. "It depends on the production. If the script is good, cast and director is good, I'll go anywhere.

"You have to ask, what is Hollywood today anyway? I mean, there is a physical place by that name and a different aesthetic and scale, but movies are no longer made there. There is so much collaboration now. The money can come from Japan, the movie might have a Korean director and be made in the US; it is not about where you make the movie anymore."

The big difference he says is how much waste there is on a US set. "They shoot a lot more and then select the best material. But once you get to the set there's not much difference between a Japanese or foreign movie. There are directors who like to do a lot of takes and others like [Clint] Eastwood [Director of Letters from Iwo Jima] who usually says 'one will do.'"

A smart, erudite man, Watanabe is acutely aware of the dangers of cultural typecasting inside the Hollywood machine. In the DVD voiceover for The Last Samurai, director Zwick explains that his star worked so hard because he "knew in some fundamental way" that the images of Japanese actors for decades were "two-dimensional at best and often caricatured."

As great an actor as he is, he has made his name playing roles within the very restricted Hollywood template for Asian men: warriors, generals, businessmen and sinister Oriental bad-guys. Is it possible to break out of this template?

"Well, I'd like to play ordinary people too and we're always developing such scripts." But he acknowledges it is difficult to find roles that

don't condescend. "About half the scripts sent to me feature characters I just can't identify with, particularly one-dimensional businessmen, or if it's a comedy some absurd 10-year-old Japanese stereotype. There's no point in getting mad about it; it's just the way things are. But I want to positively challenge such stereotypes."

That sometimes means challenging the director and the script, he explains, even after accepting a role. "Oh yes, there are things in scripts that you cannot let go by. In Letters, there were times when I told Eastwood 'this is just not believable,'" he says, adding that he made daily suggestions and asked the director to make sure that costumes, props and sets were accurate. "The story had to be true, but Eastwood is not someone I had to fight with because he always listened carefully and respected my opinions, right up to the end of the movie."

He says the most serious script dispute on Letters was the death scene. "We discussed it for weeks and I disagreed with the original version. Some people felt he should have committed seppuku, but I felt that beautified his death. Being the man he was, having asked so much of his men, he would have fought until he had erased himself. When nothing was left, he would have accepted death. I felt that very strongly."

Watanabe always chooses scripts "on instinct" and claims it has rarely let him down. He says he immediately knew Iwo Jima and Memories were special, but once he accepted the parts had to dig deep into himself, a process he found exhausting. "I can't become another person, no matter how much make-up I wear. Something of your own past, your experiences and personality always comes out in the role and that makes acting very risky. You're exposed. You always wonder if you can pull it off."

His job outside Japan is made harder by the language barrier. Watanabe studied English intensely for Last Samurai and Memoirs. "Dialogue itself is not so difficult, but understanding the meaning behind the words and what the director and the scriptwriter wants is a challenge."

Memoirs of a Geisha

The burden of playing Kuribayashi after Katsumoto in Last Samurai, two signature roles loaded with historical and political freight and scrutinized in Japan like few films before or since, added to his exhaustion last year. Watanabe has admitted that he was "nervous" about making Iwo Jima, "a film that was so important to my culture." That the movie garnered such praise is testament to his hard work, though some critics didn't appreciate it. "Doesn't have much to say, except that Japanese are human beings too," wrote one, ignoring what an achievement that was after decades of hoary cinematic clichés and banzai-screaming generals.

Watanabe rarely discusses his illness, though those who know him say his on-screen intensity and stillness is partly a product of being so close to death, and knowing it could come calling again. He admits to mining his memories of fighting leukemia when filming Memories of Tomorrow. "I don't think you should show those experiences on screen because they'll take over the character you're playing. But when I was making the movie, I began to remember.

Memories of Tomorrow

"When you're sick, you're not thinking 24 hours a day about your suffering, about dying. You want to talk and laugh and think about other things. In the midst of trying to live your life normally, the fear and dread, the realization that it might all end, rises up inside of you. That's what I brought to that movie, although I didn't intend to at the start. The director was good enough to listen to me and we changed some scenes."

The actor who blurs the boundary between screen roles and the guy in the shaving mirror is of course something of a cinematic cliché. Watanabe, who has built a career playing proud, honorable and fatalistic men, seems closer than most to his cinematic persona. He is reputed to lead a frugal, strict life, and has a reputation for being scrupulously careful and honest. There is something almost Buddha-like in his stillness and thoughtful, considered replies. Is he, as some of his cuttings suggest, a modern-day samurai?

"Well, I'd like to live like a simple samurai's life, with few possessions," he laughs. But in reality you start to accumulate things in your life. I try to differentiate between what I need and don't need. I talk to my wife and children before buying things. But I think the samurai sensibility goes deeper: respect for others; using your time carefully; keeping promises. I think those are qualities that Japan used to have but which it is somehow forgetting. They're important to me."

Watanabe's essential seriousness is perhaps one reason why he dismisses the idea that he might be a sex symbol. "I never understood that tag," he says laughing. I have no sense of myself as a sex symbol at all. But the meaning of sex symbol might be a little different in Japan and elsewhere. The Japanese version seems to come with a stronger emphasis on a sort of grown-up or mature male charm. And if that's the case, then I guess I'm happy to hear it."

Where will he go next? He says he rules nothing out, even a return to NHK. "I've worked in TV, theatre and movies so I don't mind as long as it is a good project with a wonderful director and staff. That's what makes it worthwhile getting involved in any project."

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