

community

From box office hit to the serenity of temples

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Vampires and yoga seldom appear in the same sentence — except when talking about Fran Rubel Kuzui.

The New York native is known in Hollywood for her role as director of the hit movie "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and as executive producer of its spinoff TV series, but Kuzui's current endeavors are gaining her acclaim in Japan as well.

The sprightly 46-year-old has traded in her Hollywood digs for a UNESCO World Heritage site in Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture, and replaced her director's chair with a yoga mat.

Escaping Tokyo's rush, Kuzui and her husband, Kaz Kuzui, divide their time between Tokyo's fast pace and a much slower one in Nikko. It was in Nikko that they came upon another sacred site, perfect for their company EcoNikko and a yoga studio within an ancient Buddhist temple.

The temple and surrounding grounds had been left in a state of disarray. Rotten floors and a garden engulfed by bramble hid the temple's charm. But the Kuzuis and business partner Dominica Serigano saw past the mess and decided the location would be perfect for EcoNikko's vision.

"We started EcoNikko to create a place where people could come and renew and rejuvenate their body, mind, and spirit. I had been looking for something like this myself in Japan. But I could never find the kind of place that was open and free of restrictions."

Kuzui refers to the venture as her "karma yoga" project, and helps run the business without focusing on making a profit. The yogic undertaking is not entirely out of character. Yoga has played a role in Kuzui's life since her college days and throughout her career.

The self-proclaimed "city girl" grew up in New York, attended college there, and completed a degree in television and a masters in film at New York University in the late '60s.

"I graduated at a time when film was coming into its own and the NYU School of the Arts was just forming," says Kuzui. "Martin Scorsese was just graduating when I entered the school and Francis Ford Coppola was always hanging around."

Despite the abundance of talent coming out of the school, the role women were to play within the film industry was still not clear. And although Kuzui knew where she wanted to go, getting there was another matter.

"When I was in film school there was never any discussion about female students becoming directors." Within her graduating class there were only three other women (two became script supervisors and the other became a writer.) "In my heart I always wanted to be a director, but as I've said, when I was in school it was never anything that women thought they could do."

Kuzui got her first break as an undergraduate when a public broadcasting service in New York picked up a script she had written. "I was hired because they bought my script. They immediately assigned me to a project and

within three weeks I was an associate producer at the National Education Television station."

A year later, Kuzui was given the chance to run the New York Film Unit of Encyclopedia Britannica to produce educational films. "I was running the company by the time I was 25," she says.

"When they closed the unit I met a woman who agreed to train me to be a script supervisor. This was my entry into making feature films and I jumped at it." Her new career path eventually led her

'When I find someone treating me differently because I'm a woman I remind myself it's only a question of their mind and I need to make room for them to change.'

to her husband, also within the movie business. Their first meeting Kuzui looks back at using the cliché "love at first sight" to describe. "Our story almost sounds like a corny movie."

"Kaz came to New York to make a Japanese film called "Proof of the Man." I was hired as part of the U.S. film crew and Kaz was the first assistant director."

They met in the production office, had their first date a week later and have been together ever since. "I always joke that Kaz didn't speak very good English at that point and by the time his English got better we were already married."

Her partner was what brought her to her second home, Japan, and was a driving force behind her realizing her director vision.

"One day Kaz brought me to a hotel, checked me in and told me not to come home until I had finished the screenplay I had been dreaming of writing," recalls Kuzui.

"It was a very long week but I finished 'Tokyo Pop' that way. He told me that he didn't think he could live with me for the rest of my life if I didn't try to make a film."

"So we made 'Tokyo Pop' and I had the career I had always wanted."

The tale seemed fitting for her at the time — a story about an American woman trying to understand Japanese youth culture and falling in love with a Japanese man.

The critically acclaimed film debuted in 1988, four years prior to her "Buffy" break.

The first film and the others that followed helped her "to earn money by being myself," something she says she has wanted to do ever since she was a child.

When she came across the "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" script she saw the deeper idea of being yourself reflected in its leading character. "It's very hard to

possible. When I got on the plane I noticed that the pilot of the big jumbo jet was a woman," Kuzui remembers.

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