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## CAST

**Tak Sakaguchi** Prisoner KSC2-303  
**Hideo Sakaki** The Man  
**Chieko Misaka** The Girl  
**Kenji Matsuda** Yakuza Leader  
**Yuichiro Arai** Motorcycle-Riding Yakuza  
**Minoru Matsumoto** Crazy Yakuza  
**Kazuhito Ohba** Yakuza with Glasses  
**Takehiro Katayama** Red-Haired Assassin  
**Ayumi Yoshihara** Long-Haired Female Assassin  
**Shôichirô Masumoto** One-Handed Cop  
**Toshiro Kamiaka** Samurai Warrior  
**Yukihito Tanikado** Cop with Barrett  
**Hoshimi Asai** Short-Haired Female Assassin  
**Ryosuke Watabe** Yakuza Zombie  
**Motonari Koyima** Prisoner

## CREW

Directed by **Ryûhei Kitamura**  
Screenplay by **Ryûhei Kitamura** and **Yudai Yamaguchi**  
Produced by **Keishiro Shin**  
Executive Producer **Hideo Nishimura**  
Associate Producer **Nov Takahashi**  
Director of Photography **Takumi Furuya**  
Film Editor **Shûichi Kakesu**  
Special Makeup Effects **Susumu Nakatani**  
Action Director **Yûji Shimomura**  
Music by **Nobuhiko Morino**  
Second Unit Director **Yudai Yamaguchi**



A man in a dark suit and tie stands in a dense, dark jungle. He is holding a large, black, futuristic-looking rifle across his chest. He has a serious expression and a small red mark on his forehead. The background is filled with lush green foliage and dappled sunlight.

**OF BLOOD  
AND SPARKS:  
TWO DECADES  
WITH *VERSUS***

by Tom Mes

Around the turn of the millennium, a wave of new films from Asia and especially from Japan announced something of a revolution in genre cinema. The back-to-back emergence of Hideo Nakata's *Ring* (1998), Takashi Miike's *Audition* (1999), and Kinji Fukasaku's *Battle Royale* (2000), to mention only the most prominent Japanese titles, formed the vanguard of what would soon become known as "Asia Extreme"—a moniker coined by Tartan Films, the British distributor that was the first to realize their potential, seizing the momentum by launching a specialist label for their release.

The impact of this first wave of titles was greatly aided by the fact that they were skillfully crafted and generously budgeted films. Among them was also a film of somewhat more modest stature, but one that overflowed with such creative ambition that it would leave a lasting imprint in Japan and beyond: Ryūhei Kitamura's largely self-financed and independently made *Versus* (2000).

### **DANGEROUS DISCS**

None of this likely would have happened, though, without DVD. By the time of Asia Extreme's unveiling, the home video market had almost entirely abandoned the VHS cassette and switched to the digital disc, which was significantly cheaper to produce than videotape, resulting in lower retail prices yet higher profit margins for studios and distributors—a situation that worked in favor of developing a sell-through market rather than one for rental. Tartan's Asia Extreme releases were firmly a product of the DVD age: branded as a new kind of film for a new kind of medium, a collectable commodity, recognizably packaged and sold at one's local chain retailer, where it was neatly stocked in its own easy-to-locate section. This mainstream domain was where Asia Extreme made its mark and most of its profits: much of the label's intended audience did not have access to arthouse cinemas and even if they did, the films they would find there were, in the words of Tartan CEO Hamish McAlpine, "Italian soppy, weepy romantic comedies rather than the more ballsy cinema that's out there."

That those same arthouse films had until then formed the company's brand identity was a moot point. Indeed, Tartan discovered many of the films and filmmakers it

absorbed into the Asia Extreme roster at film festivals and film markets. The new branding strategy simply transplanted some films from the ranks of art to a newly constructed category of "wild" and "dangerous" genre cinema from East Asia—a move whose dubious Orientalist undertones have rightly been pointed out and criticized on many occasions. Yet, Asia Extreme retained the notion of the auteur filmmaker that is so central in art film discourse: many of the Asia Extreme releases featured the director's name prominently on the packaging, usually above the title. This strategy, of using the auteur name as a guaranteed promise of transgressive content to be found within, would find its apogee when Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003) won the Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004, at the height of Asia Extreme's success—launching polemic tirades from established film critics such as Manohla Dargis against the dangers of "mainstreaming exploitation." Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, elitist laments over the dangers of popular culture for the uneducated and impressionable masses were alive and well.

### **SPAWN OF A MOTLEY CANON**

*Versus* was hardly a likely contender for arthouse status, but it still became "Ryūhei Kitamura's *Versus*" to browsers glancing at DVD box spines on the shelves at their nearest HMV, Virgin Megastore, or Tower Records. And indeed, over the years the name Ryūhei Kitamura has remained a remarkably consistent guarantee of a certain brand of cinematic thrill ride, one that combines regular bursts of gory horror with virtuoso action sequences, its components culled from a motley canon of both Eastern and Western influences. One might argue that a sense of familiarity rooted in the latter was as much a reason for *Versus*' popularity with Western audiences as the novelty of the Asian extreme cinema wave. Kitamura's love of the roving camera, for instance, is a feature most of us will recognize as springing from the fertile soil of Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1981)—not to mention the use of a forest locale as a practical stopgap for the financially impoverished but creatively prosperous indie filmmaker. When it comes to the bloody shenanigans happening in front of that camera, *Versus* perhaps even more resembles *Thou Shalt Not Kill... Except* (1985), that murder-a-minute showcase for gleefully effective low-budget mayhem created by Raimi acolytes Josh Becker and Scott Spiegel.

A good deal of Kitamura's horror fix arguably also came from the Italian B-movies. His way of wrangling zombies certainly owes more to Lucio Fulci's belief in guts for guts' sake than to the sociological allegories of George Romero. It's more than just placing the living dead in a leafy setting that evokes the Italian zombie movie, in particular one of the last entries in this much maligned but fondly remembered subgenre that once dominated mom-and-pop video store shelves: the free-for-all *Zombie 3* (*Zombi 3*, 1988), which Fulci co-directed with *Hell of the Living Dead's* (*Virus – l'inferno dei morti viventi*, 1980) Bruno Mattei and which features a horde of undercranked sword-wielding, karate-kicking undead in various states of decomposition.

But there is another source of influence on *Versus* that springs closer to its home: the martial arts cinema of Hong Kong. One title particularly worth mentioning in this regard is Donnie Yen's remarkable directorial debut *Legend of the Wolf* (*Chin long chuen suet*, 1997; a.k.a. *The New Big Boss*), which shares some notable characteristics with *Versus*, as sparks fly when blades clash, gore is not shunned, and most of the action is set in a forest as a way to work around the budgetary limitations that were the *sine qua non* for allowing an up-and-coming movie star to prove his mettle as a film director. Indeed, *Versus* exists at only one degree of separation from Donnie Yen, since the film's fight choreographer Yūji Shimomura had just worked under him as a stuntman on the German television series *Der Puma* (1999–2000), on which Yen served as action director.

As a low-budget indie inspired by other low-budget but often groundbreaking indies, *Versus* also carries echoes of an additional high-water mark in up-by-your-own-bootstraps movie making: Robert Rodriguez's fabled debut *El Mariachi* (1992). Yet, in spite of its modest origins, it is clear throughout *Versus* that even at that point Kitamura's real aims were for an altogether glossier style of big-screen kinetics—one he would come closer to realizing in *Aragami* and *Azumi* (both 2003). All those clashing blades in *Versus* may recall a long tradition of samurai films, but to at least the same extent they channel Russell Mulcahy's *Highlander* (1985), whose spark-igniting sword duels Kitamura proudly adopted as his own directorial trademark.

Another stylistic flourish that quickly became a characteristic of the Kitamura style is the 360-degree swirling camera, otherwise known as “the Brian De Palma

shot.” De Palma's most memorable use of this bravado technique is in a sequence from *Body Double* (1984), in which the apparatus, mounted on a circular dolly track, twirls around and around the hapless protagonist as he finally comes face to face with the woman of his dreams. But Kitamura would go on to push the envelope by also spinning his camera vertically, under and over his characters, as seen in *Azumi*.

## GORY, GORY HALLELUJAH

With the demise of its progenitor Tartan Films—which overstretched itself by entering the US market—the once-buzzing Asia Extreme brand receded into obscurity. What's more, today's dispersed media distribution landscape offers no room for the same kind of convenient funneling: DVDs and the chain outlets that carried them have nearly disappeared, giving way to the fragmented jungle of streaming services and the highly dedicated but much more modestly sized Blu-ray collectors market. Several of the talented filmmakers whose diverse creations Asia Extreme once lumped together like offal for the meat grinder have survived by continuing to do what the Tartan label and its derivatives sought to obscure. For their disparate and idiosyncratic styles of filmmaking, such names as Takashi Miike, Kim Ki-duk, Park Chan-wook, and Kiyoshi Kurosawa have gone on to wider individual recognition as auteurs of world cinema.



This was not the end of Japanese splatter, however, because it was precisely *Versus*' pragmatic formula for effective low-budget genre moviemaking that showed the way forward. While Ryūhei Kitamura went in search of greener pastures in the wake of his film's international success, his assistant and co-writer Yudai Yamaguchi continued to apply the *Versus* formula to a series of bloody little flicks such as *Battlefield Baseball* (*Jigoku Kōshien*, 2003) and *Meatball Machine* (2005). With these, Yamaguchi put the final touches to the mold from which a new wave of Japanese horror would be cast, beginning with *The Machine Girl* (*Kataude mashin gāru*, 2008), Noboru Iguchi's gleefully excessive tale of cyborg schoolgirls in a blood-soaked battle to the death with yakuza ninja villains. This was good old-fashioned Sam Raimi-style splatstick, soaked in gore and black humor, excessive, wild, and crazy. And it hardly cost a cent.

Iguchi's effects technician Yoshihiro Nishimura also saw this opportunity to step into the director's chair, cleverly casting *Audition* siren Eihi Shiina in the lead of his no-holds-barred *Tokyo Gore Police* (*Tōkyō zankoku keisatsu*, 2008). Nikkatsu, Japan's oldest film studio, quickly seized the growing momentum and established its Sushi Typhoon label, which churned out several more of these merry massacres in quick succession: *Vampire Girl vs. Frankenstein Girl* (*Kyūketsu Shōjo tai Shōjo Furanken*, 2009), *Alien vs. Ninja* (2010), *Mutant Girls Squad* (*Sentō shōjo: Chi no tekkamen densetsu*, 2010), and so on, using Iguchi and Nishimura effectively as in-house directors, as well as frequently bringing in *Versus* alumni Yudai Yamaguchi, Yūji Shimomura, and lead actor Tak Sakaguchi.

The works of Sushi Typhoon and its imitators were primarily aimed at the foreign market. This is hardly surprising, considering that their models, *Versus* in front, made more money overseas than they did in Japan. For all their high profile on our shores, the market for gory genre flicks in Japan is decidedly marginal. But since budgets and investment risks on these movies were kept low, the films were cheap to screen at festivals and hugely affordable for foreign distributors to buy: a situation in which everybody wins—as long as the bottom line is adhered to. This, however, is exactly what Nikkatsu forgot when it gave its Sushi Typhoon roster an upscale push by bringing on board such established names as Sion

Sono and Takashi Miike. Sono's ambitious *Cold Fish* (*Tsumetai nettaigo*, 2010) and Miike's *Yakuza Apocalypse* (*Gokudō daisenso*, 2015) could not sustain the same quick turnaround, and Nikkatsu pulled the plug on the whole venture soon after.

## GO WEST, YOUNG MAN

As noted, while all this was unfolding, Ryūhei Kitamura's ambitions lay elsewhere, and wisely so. From early on, the director boasted of great plans involving Hollywood, but after *Versus* he instead spent six more years in his homeland, a quite productive period that culminated in directing Toho's *Godzilla: Final Wars* (*Gojira: Fainaru uōzu*, 2004). Poorly received for containing rather too many of Kitamura's pet obsessions, it had the misfortune of opening in Japanese cinemas shortly after Hayao Miyazaki's smash hit *Howl's Moving Castle* (*Hauru no ugoku shiro*).

Kitamura's long-held desire to relocate to the United States did finally materialize when he was asked to direct the first in an intended series of adaptations of Clive Barker's *Books of Blood*, helming one of the most effective among those tales, *Midnight Meat Train* (2008). Even if his English-language work since then has been decidedly modest in number and scope, he has shown a notable ease in the transition to shooting overseas—an area in which Japanese filmmakers characteristically struggle and habitually fail. Kitamura's Western cinematic influences go a long way toward explaining this, as no doubt do his years studying in Australia.

*Versus* has remained Ryūhei Kitamura's signature work, while its influence continues as a template for enterprising young Japanese film directors seeking to make their mark. No better example of this exists than Shinichiro Ueda's gruesomely inventive *One Cut of the Dead* (*Kamera wo tomeruna!*, 2017): made for next to nothing, it shrewdly absorbed all the lessons of *Versus*' success—and of Sushi Typhoon's failing—to become a box office miracle and an international phenomenon.

*Tom Mes is the author of numerous books on Japanese film, including Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike, Iron Man: The Cinema of Shinya Tsukamoto, and for Arrow Books Unchained Melody: The Films of Meiko Kaji and Father, Son, Sword: The Lone Wolf and Cub Saga.*

A man with dark hair and a determined expression is shown in a forest, pointing a handgun directly at the camera. The background is filled with tall, thin trees and dappled sunlight. The overall tone is dramatic and intense.

**AN INTERVIEW  
WITH  
RYÛHEI  
KITAMURA**

**by Tom Mes**



One of the Japanese directors with the strongest international following at the moment is Ryūhei Kitamura. Wowing people the world over with his self-produced action/horror extravaganza *Versus*, Kitamura brings a different sense to Japanese cinema. Fiercely independent, armed with a passion for 1980s American action cinema, and with every cell in his body motivated to make movies the way he likes them, he has blasted rather than carved a niche for himself within the Japanese film industry. With his sights set on higher goals, Ryūhei Kitamura's career has only just begun.

First, a very basic question. Why did you decide to become a filmmaker?

[laughs] I grew up watching movies. I didn't go to school at all when I was a kid. I was just at the cinema from morning 'til evening, watching movies over and



over. So those movies were a big influence. When I was sixteen, and the time came to start thinking about what I wanted to do in life, I figured I loved watching movies, so why not become a filmmaker. It was that simple. A year later I'd made up my mind and quit high school. During class, actually, I stood up and told my teacher: "I quit. I'm going to be a film director. Goodbye." A week later I was in Australia looking for a film school.

I got a lot of influence from the films of George Miller, like *Mad Max*, and Russell Mulcahy, *Highlander*. Also Peter Weir. They're all Australian. I also loved Australian rock music, like INXS. So I felt Australia was the natural choice. I found a school for visual arts in Sydney and I just walked up to the principal and said: "I'm from Japan and I want to become a

film director, so let me in" [laughs] He thought that I was a funny guy, so he let me in and I studied there for two years.

So you're natural born filmmaker, in a way. You never tried any other job?

No.

Were those films you saw in your youth educational as well?

Yes. The movies taught me lots of things. The movies were my teachers. Watching *Mad Max* or *The Exterminator*, you know, I felt like I wanted to take revenge if people did the same thing to me. You learn what is right and what is wrong. I would watch films like *Mad Max 2*, or *Aliens*, or Sam Raimi's movies about seventy or eighty times. Sam Raimi was a really big influence on me. When I was fifteen or sixteen he was in his early twenties and with a bunch of friends he made this masterpiece *Evil Dead*. That was unbelievable. I'd never seen those kinds of handmade movies before. It made me feel that maybe I could do this kind of thing too. So Sam Raimi, James Cameron, John Carpenter, they were really important for me.

But it was not just action/horror stuff, I watched all kinds of films. One of my favourites as a kid was *A Little Romance*, starring Diane Lane. She was so cute, it was a wonderful movie. *Raise the Titanic*, that was excellent. *Fandango* is my favourite. I'm waiting so badly for somebody to release *Fandango* on DVD. If right now I have to decide my top ten favourite films, *Fandango* would be number one. But my influence also came from books and comic books. All those influences are inside me now and I'm just spilling it all out as a director.

So you still have that same frame of mind as when you were young?

Yes, I'm still the same. I go to watch movies during shooting. I finish shooting at nine so I can catch a late screening at the cinema. [laughs] When I go to festivals I try to watch as many films as I can.

Your first few films were very independently made. Did you feel a certain dissatisfaction with the structure of the Japanese film industry?

Until I made *Versus* I was so frustrated with Japanese films, because the industry didn't make entertainment movies anymore. It was always love stories, or family stories, or

something about finding yourself. I don't deny them, they're okay, but there weren't any other options. Maybe there were a few edgy, violent movies, but nothing in the middle. The pure entertainment movies didn't exist until I made *Versus*. Especially action movies. Producers told me they couldn't make money with action movies, they felt Hollywood and Hong Kong were better at it than the Japanese. I disagreed and since no producers would back me up, I decided to make movies independently. I used my own money and took the risk of making *Versus*. Just because a producer won't support me doesn't mean I can't make films. I'll do whatever it takes to make my films. That's the difference between me and other directors.

**You never considered V-cinema as an option? There's a lot of action-oriented films being made for the video market.**

No, I prefer to see my movies on the big screen.

**The name of your production company is Napalm Films, which seems to express your philosophy and your approach to cinema very well.**

[laughs] Yes. There are a lot of stupid people in the film industry, so it's my warning to them: stay out of my way, otherwise I'm gonna burn you. [laughs] It works!

**Has your opinion of the Japanese film industry changed now that you are very much a part of it?**

Yes, in some ways. After I made *Versus* I finally found some good producers, like Mata Yamamoto, who I worked with on *Azumi*. He saw *Versus* three years ago, when it wasn't released yet. He saw it at the Yubari Fantastic Film Festival and he decided that I was the one to direct *Azumi*. That was one of the biggest projects in Japan at the time. I don't think other people were happy that such a young guy, a newcomer, was chosen to handle this project, but Mata fought for me, he fought hard and backed me up all the way through. So there are some producers who take risks and who have faith in what they're doing. So it's changing. I'm still a kind of new director in Japan, but they let me do *Godzilla*. [laughs]

**Could you talk a little bit about the origin of *Versus*? I believe it was a follow-up to your first film *Down to Hell*, is that correct?**

*Down to Hell* is actually the second amateur movie I made. The first one was called *Exit* and it was my graduation short film from Australia. *Exit* was my first film and I made it when I was 19. But I'd already decided to become a filmmaker at 17, so I was really lazy at the time. I didn't direct anything for two years and I hardly went to school either. I just watched movies, went to concerts, and hung around with friends. Of course I had to make a film if I wanted to graduate. In the end I had only two days to shoot and one day to edit and the budget was the hundred dollars I had in my pocket. That's how I made my first movie. [laughs] I'm not going to show the film to anyone, but it's the same as *Versus*, in the woods, with zombies, punching, kicking, knife fights.

The students and the teachers loved it, and it even got an award, which really motivated me. I felt that maybe I could really be a film director. But then for five years after that I didn't make any films again. I was a singer in a band, but I was still being lazy about filmmaking. Lots of amateur directors make movies all the time, but not me. So it took me five years after returning to Japan to make another film and that was *Down to Hell*. This time I had \$3000 that I'd made on my part-time job, one video camera and a six-man crew and cast. It was a super low-budget video movie, but it came out quite good, so I started knocking on the doors of some producers. They all ignored me completely. Now they keep calling me and I tell them "Well, I met you five years ago," but they insist that they never met me before. Producers are like that all the time.



I was lucky to meet the actor Atsuro Watabe, though. We became close friends and decided to make a movie together independently. So that was my theatrical debut film, *Heat After Dark*. I was young and I didn't really know how to deal with a professional crew, so I was butting heads every day on the set. It was tough making that movie. Just because I was young and I didn't have any experience, the crew didn't listen to me. I thought that was so stupid. If you don't have faith in me, you shouldn't work with me in the first place. I was so angry about the Japanese way of thinking and the Japanese way of filmmaking, and that anger motivated me to make *Versus*. I was so fed up with the professional way of making films, but I'm not the kind of person to give up easily, so I decided to show them what I could do.

I did *Down to Hell* for \$3000 and with my own team, and it was really fun to make. I felt I had to go back to my origins to make *Versus*. *Down to Hell* contains everything that's also in *Versus*: it's set in the woods, since we didn't have money for sets or renting locations; everything is handmade because we didn't have money for explosions or CGI either; there's punching and kicking and falling and rolling. Originally *Versus* started out as a sequel to *Down to Hell*, it was going to be *Down to Hell 2*. We started making it with about \$10,000. I didn't want to spend that much money, so I wanted to shoot it the same way, on video and with a very low budget. As I was proceeding with the pre-production, the script kept growing and was becoming really cool, and I met several very interesting young actors. I felt that I couldn't just do a sequel. I had to take a chance, I had to bet more on it to win the game. Moviemaking is a game, a gamble, and I felt it wasn't wise to try to play it safe. I needed to risk everything if I wanted to get anywhere, and that's when I decided to shoot it on film and make a movie for the big screen.

A lot of Japanese producers and directors like to work in this low-risk way. They shoot on low budgets and for the straight-to-video market. You can get a little money, but it doesn't go anywhere. There are too many people around who think that way. I had to do something different, something that no other director would think of. No other director would risk their life to make a movie, but that's what I did. I called everybody, my family, my friends, ex-girlfriends, producers. We called everybody to raise money. Everyday we were shooting in the mountains and as soon as we finished we would start making calls, because we didn't have any money for the next day. [laughs]



It was tough, but we were really happy to be doing it. I was really confident that by making the film completely my own way—I was writing, producing, in control of everything—Hollywood would call me. Even though everybody in the Japanese film industry ignored me, I had 100% confidence that Hollywood would call me. After the experience of making *Heat After Dark*, I was surprised that all the cast and crew of *Versus* had confidence in me. They didn't think that I was just a big mouth, that I was just bluffing. They believed in me. We took two years to make *Versus* and we didn't have any money. We couldn't do other jobs, so it's still a great mystery how we could survive two years of hard work with no money at all. [laughs] But it's a gamble anyway and I think I won.

**What made you decide to pack so many genres into *Versus*? I mean, there's gun action, martial arts action, there's chanbara, horror, comedy.**

It was my first feature film and maybe it was going to be my last. I risked everything, so there was a possibility that I could never do it again. Then why not do everything I like and use everything that influenced me? I just put everything I loved into the movie. People categorise things too easily. They say it's a horror movie, so you shouldn't add comedy or action. They want to limit it too much to one genre. I'm not that simple, I got a lot of influence from a lot of things. I don't like people telling me what type of movie I should make.



The inspiration for *Versus* came from the films of the 1980s, Sam Raimi movies, John Carpenter movies, George Miller movies. Everything I like: zombies, gun fighting, kung fu fighting, sword fighting. I wanted to do car action too, because I love *Mad Max* so much, but I didn't have enough money for it. [laughs] So aside from the car action, everything is in there.

**So you're keeping the car action for a future film, then.**

Yes. [laughs]

**One of the great virtues of *Versus* is that it's such a genuinely handcrafted film. Did you set out to create a really handmade film?**

Yes. Lots of people told me that I could never beat Hollywood movies, since they have lots of money and they can do anything they want using CGI. But CGI doesn't look real to me at all. It doesn't have as much power as films from the 80s. Sam Raimi's movies had power, *Mad Max* had power, *The Terminator* had power. These days, movies don't affect me as much as the films from the 80s, and I believe that it's because twenty years ago the movies were handmade. It's not computers making movies, it was people making movies. You could sense the power, the passion, and the energy of those people. I really believe in that.

My cast and crew are like a family. It's not like we meet for the first time on the first day of shooting. We don't consider filmmaking a job. It's a way of life, a way of thinking. *Versus* is my flesh and blood, everything is in it. I didn't actually have the title *Versus* until the very end of shooting. We were still using "*Return to Hell: Down to Hell 2*" as a title. Of course it wasn't *Down to Hell 2* at all anymore, but I couldn't come up with a good title. Then my best friend—he went to Australia with me when I was 17 and he is now the second unit director on *Godzilla*, shooting the overseas sequences—he was shooting the making of *Versus* at the time and I told him I couldn't come up with a good title. He told me, "All your life you've been fighting, and this movie is all you, so you should call it *Versus*." He is the one that came up with that excellent title.

Even though I'm directing big budget movies now, I still try to keep the same philosophy. Because I believe that the audience can feel the energy that we put into making the film. My audience will tell me when I lose sight of myself and start directing just for the money. [laughs] I don't want to be like that.

**Why do you think *Versus* became such a big hit with foreign audiences?**

Because they haven't seen a Japanese film like that for a long time. It's also something different from Hong Kong films or Hollywood films. I'm actually surprised that the film did quite well in Japan, too. When I was making it, I didn't care at all about what the Japanese people would think about it. I was just focused on the international audience, because I was so disappointed in Japanese movies. I was sure the foreign viewers would like it, because I'm a big fan of fantastic film, so I know what they want to see. I'm the same as the fans of *Versus*, and I make the films that I want to see.

One thing that makes *Versus* special is bushido, the way of the samurai. You can see that way of thinking when you look at *The Last Samurai*, but the Japanese themselves have forgotten it. Tom Cruise has to show the Japanese what the way of the samurai is. [laughs] The samurai attitude, their way of thinking about life and death attracts me a lot. I think it's very cool the way we lived back in the time of the samurai, but the modern Japanese have forgotten it completely. That's why I want to add that kind of taste to my films. That's one thing that makes *Versus* special, that makes it

different from something like Hong Kong films. There are many excellent action films in Hong Kong or Hollywood or China, but the difference is the way of the samurai. Like the final duel in *Versus*, when the two guys are fighting and they close their eyes. They know that the next attack will be the last. They know they're going to die. Maybe the bad guy knows he's going to lose, but he accepts that fact. That's a very Japanese way of thinking and I try to put it into all my movies.

**I hear you met lead actor Tak Sakaguchi while he was fighting in the street.**

Yeah, that's true. He's a streetfighter. He fought with a bear once, and won. Otherwise he would be dead now, of course. [laughs] He fought a crocodile, he even fought a bull. [laughs] He's a real fighter. He's just like he is in *Versus*, he's a crazy guy, but I love him. He's now the action director for *Godzilla*, which should bring some new blood to that series.

I met him on the street while he was beating somebody up and told him to call me. I told him he should be fighting in films instead of on the street. I told him to come to this party I was going to. And when he arrived there, I was the one who was fighting. [laughs] With some stupid German guy who was in a friend's film. I was beating his head into a table just when Taku came in. [laughs] So the first time I met him, he was fighting, and the second time we met, I was fighting. Hideo Sakaki, who plays the bad guy in *Versus*, was also at that party, but he was talking to some pretty girl trying to get her phone number. He didn't care about the fighting. That's how the three of us met.

The character Taku plays in *Versus*, the prisoner, he's a combination of my character and Taku's character. He knows how I get angry and I know how he gets angry. For example, I know he hates it when somebody treats women badly.

**Could you talk about the new version of *Versus* that was recently released.**

Three days after I finished *Sky High* I was back in the mountains again. I reassembled the crew and cast and went back to the same mountain, with the same poor lunch. I was carrying the equipment myself, it was exactly the same as when we originally made the film. We shot for five days, more crazy zombie stuff, and more fighting for the sequence at the end. We also put some funny CGI in the beginning of the film and changed some of the music. We remixed it in 6.1 channel sound.



**I'd like to move on to *Aragami*. I hear that that film came into existence after you met director Yukihiko Tsutsumi at a film festival and you challenged each other to make a film.**

I was at the CineAsia festival in Cologne, Germany, about three years ago. At the bar of the hotel one night I met Yukihiko Tsutsumi, who is a very famous director. I wasn't that famous at the time, but he had seen *Heat After Dark*. I was surprised that someone like Tsutsumi-san had seen that film. He said he liked it and he invited me to have a drink at the bar. I accepted of course, because I was so happy that Tsutsumi-san knew me. So we had a drink at the bar at midnight and we started to talk. I told him I liked his film *Chinese Dinner*, which is a film set in only one location, a Chinese restaurant, with two guys and one waitress, and that's it. It's 80 minutes long and it's very well directed and well written. And Tsutsumi told me that he made *Chinese Dinner* because he had seen *Heat After Dark*. The opening scene takes place at a restaurant and he said that that scene inspired him to make *Chinese Dinner*.

Tsutsumi directs a lot of TV series, music videos, and commercials, but he loves making movies. So he said, "If you like *Chinese Dinner*, why don't we make another one? We'll do *Chinese Dinner 2* and *3* at the same time. You think of one situation and I will think of another, and we'll release them together." If it hadn't been Yukihiko Tsutsumi I might not have done it, but I respect him a lot and I said yes. He and I are



both outsiders, we both came from outside the film industry, so two outsiders doing something different was an idea that sounded like fun to me.

But it was midnight at a hotel bar, so the next morning you're back on planet earth. Normally people would forget about that kind of conversation, they don't take responsibility for something they say. Producers in particular say "Let's do this" all the time, but they forget about it later. Tsutsumi didn't forget. Three months later he called me and said "We're really going to do it, are you still interested?" I respect people who take responsibility for what they say, so it was natural for me to say yes again.

That was the second time we spoke, and the third time he told me he was going to start shooting the film the following week! He said I had to come up with an idea for my film in one week. He was ready to do his film *2LDK*, which is a story of two pretty girls killing each other. But I wondered what I should do, and he suggested doing something like *The Matrix*, but with two old men. Grandpa doing *The Matrix*! [laughs] I told him it wasn't fair that he got to work with two pretty girls and I had to use old men. I thought at least I should get some young cool guys to fight each other. I was preparing

*Azumi* at the time, and I felt that it would be great to have a chance to practice doing swordfighting scenes. So I set my situation in an old, mysterious temple with two samurai.

How did you approach financing the project? It's a lot of fun to say "Let's make movies together" but it needs to be financed too. And I can imagine having to finance two films at the same time makes it extra difficult.

I have a good relationship with Shinya Kawai, for whom I made *The Messenger*, the short movie that was part of Jam Films. He's an excellent producer. He doesn't overthink things too long, he decides very quickly. I presented the idea of making two movies with Tsutsumi-san and he said: "Sounds good, let's do it." So there are still some good producers in Japan. Of course it helped that I was becoming a little bit better known thanks to *Versus*, *Alive*, and being selected for *Azumi*, and Tsutsumi is already a very famous guy, so we didn't have any problem finding the money.

On *Aragami* I had one week to write and one month to prepare. Then I shot it in seven days, which is not much. And the budget was pretty low. I was also preparing *Azumi* at the same time and the producers of *Azumi* got angry that I decided to do this low budget movie in the middle of preparing the biggest film project in Japan. Mata Yamamoto got so angry, but I didn't care. [laughs] I'm happy to make producers angry. If producers aren't angry, that means the movie will be no good. When I'm making the film, producers get angry, but when it's finished, they become happy. That's the only way to make good movies.



Could you talk about the casting of Takao Osawa and Masaya Kato for *Aragami*?

We were only one month away from shooting, so it was difficult to find the right people. I was lucky that Osawa, who plays the samurai, accidentally saw a memo I'd sent to Kawai-san. Kawai-san left it on a table or something. There was no screenplay yet at the time, but Takao Osawa saw this three-page memo and he



loved the idea and wanted to do it. He's a great actor and I really respect him, but I never thought he would be willing to do this film. So suddenly everything sped up after he got involved, and I wrote the screenplay especially for Osawa, because I was so happy to have him in the film.

Then Masaya Kato was a friend of Kawai-san as well. Kato is a big fan of fantastic films, he'd seen *Versus* and loved it. When Kawai-san asked if he wanted to work with the director of *Versus*, Kato immediately said yes.

In *Aragami*, like in *Azumi* and *Versus* as well, there is a strong presence of chanbara. Do you feel that there is a need to revive that genre?

Yes, because nobody else is doing it. A few directors are trying, but they're not doing it well. You know, *Versus* is a film about fighting, any kind of fighting. But I was

surprised that when I was traveling Europe and America with the film, the audience and press told me that *Versus* was the best chanbara film they'd seen in a long time. They said they hadn't seen those kinds of films from Japan since the *Baby Cart* series or the original *Zatoichi*. I was very surprised, and it made me think that if people like chanbara that much, I should make a real chanbara movie. Then *Azumi* came along and it was the perfect opportunity to make a big samurai swordfighting movie.

I still feel that we must revive the chanbara genre, because that's what we're good at, but we're not doing it anymore. Hollywood will do it with more money and with Tom Cruise. I loved *Last Samurai*, but it's what we should be making. Hollywood always does it first.

With *Azumi* and *Sky High* you're moving towards films with female protagonists. Why the change? Is that purely a coincidence or is that something you wanted to try?

It's just a coincidence. It's always more fun working with girls than with sweaty guys. [laughs] When I was doing *Versus* there were mean looking guys all around me. [laughs] When I was doing *Sky High* I decided that this time I would pick only beautiful girls to work with. It was fun on the set. But I don't really care if it's a guy or a girl. It depends on the story you want to tell.

And now you're going to kill off *Godzilla*.

Yes. [laughs]. I was initially thinking of moving to the States and doing something different. *Azumi* was the biggest movie of 2003 and I did more than my best on it. I thought that was it, there was no way to go from there within Japan, so it was time to move out. But then Toho asked me if I would be interested in doing *Godzilla: Final Wars*, and who can resist that? Nobody can resist *Godzilla*, only the chosen ones get to direct those films. It's going to be a very special one, because it's the fiftieth anniversary and it will be the last *Godzilla* movie. It will be the last and the biggest, so I couldn't resist. So that's keeping me in Japan for one more year. After *Godzilla*, that's it, I'm moving away. I'll continue to make movies in Japan too, I think, but right now I need to move on to something new. And that's to make movies in America.

*Special thanks to Filmfreak Distribution and the Brussels International Fantastic Film Festival. Note: this interview was originally published by Midnight Eye on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2004 and is reprinted here with permission.*



# **HOW WE MADE VERSUS**

**by Ryûhei Kitamura**



When we started making *Versus* back in fall of 1999, we were just bunch of amateurs.

In 1998 I won first prize at an independent film festival called Indie's Movie Festival with my \$3000 Hi-8 Video movie *Down to Hell*. The winner received a grant of \$20,000, and with this I started developing a sequel, *Down2Hell: The Return*. As I started developing the script, it got bigger, crazier, and became something that was no longer *Down to Hell 2*, ultimately evolving into *Versus*.

Basically what I wanted to do was a Lucio Fulci-style zombie vs. yakuza gangsters movie, mixing all sorts of fighting styles—gun action and kung fu. One day when I was brainstorming with my co-writer Yudai Yamaguchi, my lead actor Tak Sakaguchi was also in the office and he was reading one of my manga books—Tetsuya Chiba's *Ore wa Teppei* ("I'm Teppei"). It's my favorite classic manga and it was about kendo—traditional Japanese martial arts using a bamboo sword. Tak raised his head and said, "How about adding a samurai element?" We got so excited because nobody had ever done a samurai zombie movie. But how would we mix all these elements in one movie? That was when lightning struck again—my favorite movie, *Highlander*. Two rivals fighting across time – that was it. *Zombie meets Highlander*, yakuza and samurai using kung fu!

The budget kept getting bigger and bigger, and in the end it was around \$300,000, so obviously it was much more than the prize for Indie's Movie Festival. So I had to find an additional investor, and I did. A day before we started pre-production, the investor dropped out at the last minute. I had to make a tough decision: postpone the project and look for new investor, or... we just go. I was crazy enough to decide to go, but we had no money.

My producer Keishiro Shin and I got multiple credit cards and withdrew as much cash as we could, which gave us \$50,000. That's all. We knew the money would run out in a week to ten days, but it didn't stop us. I just knew one thing—once I started, I wouldn't give up and would finish it no matter what.

So it began.

The location was this off-season ski resort area in Gunma Prefecture, three hours north of Tokyo. We rented a ski lodge. At first, there were around 30 of us. The

special makeup team and gun effects team were professionals, but the rest of the crew were not really professional yet. Cinematographer Takumi Furuya was an assistant camera operator and this was his first project as the department head. Though he's now one of the best stunt coordinators in Japan, at the time Yūji Shimomura was still young and hadn't done anything big yet. Me, I'd only done one small 50-minute indie movie, *Heat After Dark*, and wasn't really a professional. My producer Keishiro Shin was my best friend who was working in a hotel before he quit the job and joined me, and had never done any filmmaking other than small videos with me.

So the problem was: the core of this crew was made up of amateurs. We had no sound, no lighting, no ADs. We could only afford one day of Steadicam and three days of lighting.

For the first week, the shoot was chaos. Nothing really worked out. We were way behind schedule and the quality of the results wasn't great. That is why the scene where the gangs arrive and confront KSC2-303 and the first zombie fight sequences are not the same quality as the rest of the movie. We didn't have the person who later became the most important right-hand man for me: cinematographer Takumi Furuya. Somebody else was shooting but wasn't matching up to my artistic demands. So I called Takumi, who was first assistant camera on *Heat After Dark*, for help. He was only an assistant back then, but I knew he shared the same visual style and passion as me.

Takumi knew that this was just a small indie movie and he wouldn't get paid, but he came anyway, and he brought his assistants, too. So I finally had the professional team I needed to make my vision real.

Because we were so far behind schedule, I decided to split the unit. Yudai Yamaguchi took the second unit to shoot all the close-ups of special makeup and some action pieces while I handled principal photography on the other side of the mountain.

Because of the two units, we needed more manpower, so I called all my friends from all over Japan for help. Some came to help for just a few days; some came for weeks and months.

The money was the biggest problem. The \$50,000 we had ran out after a few weeks. I called every number in my cell phone asking for money. I don't really remember how I did it, but there was always someone who sent me \$3,000 here, \$5,000 here.

We were staying at the ski lodge but couldn't afford to pay for our meals, so we had to cook ourselves dinner every night after a long and tough day of shooting.

More people were coming in to help us, so a month later, there was no room for all of us and I remember people were sleeping in sleeping bags in the dining room, and even on the stairs.

We didn't even have proper ADs. One day my lead actor Tak Sakaguchi had a day off as an actor so he volunteered to be AD, and it was pure chaos. It's the scene where Boss's three assassins arrive—I was never happy with the scene, and that's why I re-shot and replaced the entire scene in *Ultimate Versus*.

As the shoot extended into November it got so cold. My poor friends played zombies coming out of the ground, buried in frozen ground and being sprayed with tons of blood, and their clothes were torn so they were almost naked.

Four to five weeks into shooting, the lodge kicked us out. Ski season was about to begin and we'd stayed way longer than we'd promised—and it wasn't 30 people, it was more like 50–60 people. So we moved west, looking for more friendly support, and ended up in my hometown, Osaka, and Kyoto. Some of us stayed in cheap hotels; some stayed in our friends' houses.

The scene where 303 confronts the boss for the first time and gets killed was shot in the same mountain of Kyoto where I shot *Down to Hell* five years before, and shot part of *Azumi* four years later. The first half of the final battle between 303 and the boss was shot in the forest of Osaka. The future scene was shot in a notorious ruin called "Black Mansion" in Shirahama, three hours south of Osaka.

We stayed in the west for a few weeks, but it started to snow, and we ran out of money, so we had to stop for a few months. While we were asking around for more money so we could resume shooting, we built the set of the ruined city 99 years later. We also did the photoshoot which later became the iconic poster.

Spring arrived. We got a little money but couldn't afford to travel, so we found the location near Tokyo where we shot the latter half of the final battle scene and some pick-ups.

Nobody remembers how many shooting days there were in total, but I would guess it was around 45–50 days. A total of 4,800 set-ups. We were so amateur and



the footage didn't even have a proper slate. I was changing the script on the set everyday anyway and scene numbers didn't really exist.

4,800 set-ups of silent 16mm film. No sound. No script supervisor. No slate. Shot in five different woods... It was like a maze to figure out which shot was which. Especially those microsecond shots in the action sequences.

The only way to edit something as complex as this was with a computer. It was back in 2000 and we were still editing the old school way in Japan, and only three editors had the Avid computer editing system. So we went to Shuichi Kakesu, one of the biggest editors in Japan, who was already using Avid. We unloaded mountains of films in front of him and asked for help.



I said, “This is not only my future, this is the future of Japanese cinema. I can’t finish the movie without your help... and I have no money to pay you now... but I will.” He laughed and said, “In a career of over 30 years, a lot of people have said that and I’ve never met anyone who actually did.” I looked straight into his eyes and said, “I will be the first.” Somehow he believed it and helped me to finish this movie. I kept my promise and he edited all my subsequent movies—*Azumi*, *Sky High*, *Godzilla: Final Wars*, *Lupin the Third*, etc.

There was no CG or VFX used except the title sequence. I asked around and found that someone who was working in the studio had the INFERNO system. It was very rare in Japan back in 2000 and was too expensive, but this guy let us sneak in for a couple of hours and made that cool title sequence for free.

Sound effects were done by Kenji Shibasaki. We worked together on my first movie, *Heat After Dark*, and all my movies thereafter. I kept telling him to boost every sound effect as if this was a John Woo or Sam Raimi movie.

The music was composed by Nobuhiko Morino, my best friend since we were fifteen and my bandmate. This was his first real job as composer. He had no musical education or background, no knowledge, no experience. Basically it was him and his computer, but did an amazing job.

Color was challenging. There was no such thing as a DI (digital intermediate) back then, and we shot in so many different locations, with no light, shooting super-fast, so the climate, season, color of the skies, woods, etc. never really matched. We decided to apply a filter to certain scenes like the boss’s arrival (cyan), the boss kills 303 (amber), and the final battle (amber).

It took us 3–4 months to finish and on July 15<sup>th</sup> 2000, *Versus* was born.

#### **Equipment:**

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| Camera:     | ARRIFLEX SR11 Super 16                               |
| Film stock: | Eastman 16mm 100T                                    |
|             | Eastman 16mm 50D (Samurai sequences 4x push process) |
|             | Eastman 16mm 500T (future sequences)                 |

## ABOUT THE RESTORATION

*Versus* was restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 2.0 stereo, 5.1, and 6.1 sound.

*Versus* was produced on a very low budget and shot on 16mm, entirely on location. The footage was transferred to files, from which all editing, colour correction, and other post production was completed. From this data, 35mm intermediate elements were created, which were the source for theatrical prints. The film was shot without sound, so the soundtrack was created completely in post. Because of this specific workflow, the film has always exhibited an occasionally soft appearance and loose synch, both traits in keeping with how the film was produced.

For this restoration, this original 35mm intermediate element was scanned in 4K resolution at Imagica, Japan. The film was graded and restored at Dragon DI, Wales. Picture grading was supervised and approved by director Ryûhei Kitamura..

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films

**Dragon DI:** Owain Morgan, Khristian Hawkes, Jemma George

**Imagica:** Ryohei Mito

**Videovision:** Sanjeev Singh

All original materials used in this restoration were made available by Videovision.

The extended *Ultimate Versus* version has been constructed using the restored theatrical version and SD tape master elements supplied by the filmmaker.

Special thanks to Ryûhei Kitamura for his generous participation on this project.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**  
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

Disc Production Manager **Nora Mehenni**

QC **Alan Simmons**

Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**

Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Artist **Chris Malbon**

Design **Scott Saslow**

## SPECIAL THANKS

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