

HOLLYWOOD JAPAN FILE

BY MATT KAUFMAN

ROGER WALCH IS A SWISS FILMMAKER AND a longtime resident of Kyoto who makes films that capture the beauty of Japan in out-of-the-way places that most guidebooks don't cover. His latest film is an erotic mystery and travelogue about a first-time visitor to Japan (played by Ted Taylor) who may have a connection to supernatural creatures called *tengu* found in Japanese folklore.

Why did you decide to make a film about *tengu*?

Roger Walch: I have always been fascinated by Japanese myths and legends. In fact, all my previous short films include some surreal and supernatural elements. Ever since I read about the theory that some *tengu* and *oni* can be connected to shipwrecked foreigners, I was fascinated and wanted to make a film about it. *Tengu* are interesting creatures and have many features that bear resemblance to Westerners: They have long noses; red (sunburned?) skin; they eat meat; are tall in stature and are skilled in fighting techniques unknown to the Japanese at the time. According to legend, the Tengu of Kurama Mountain (north of Kyoto) trained the famous warrior Minamoto no Yoshitsune in martial arts. Actually, some people are convinced that he was of Russian origin. During the Sakoku Period (1637-1853), no foreigner could enter the country on penalty of death. So I decided to write a fictitious story of a shipwrecked foreigner who was forced to live in hiding and ultimately became the origin of a local *tengu* legend.

How did making *Tengu* differ from your previous films?

Tengu is the longest movie I've made so far. It is almost a full-fledged feature film. Of course, the production was much more professional. In my previous films, I was mostly working with volunteers, sometimes with members of university film clubs or circles. For *Tengu*, I decided to pay everybody. Work ethic and dedication are on a very different level when you pay your cast and staff. We shot *Tengu* in full High Definition with a digital Sony XD cam – a dramatic improvement in picture quality over my previous productions. We also used wireless microphones for the first time, which was a real challenge and much more difficult than

I expected.

Tell me a little about the cast. How did you get legendary actor/singer Mikami Kan (*Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence, Tokyo Decadence*) onboard?

Mikami Kan and I have been friends for almost four years. We met at the Chikashitsu Underground Festival 2005 in Tokyo. He watched my film (*Yuwaku 2*) and obviously felt a connection. Immediately after the screening he came over to me and started to talk about Terayama Shuji. We both share a deep admiration for this great Jap-

Sento, who plays Sanae in *Tengu*, approached me after the screening of my films in an independent movie theatre in Nagoya two years ago. She was a supporting actress in the film *Ichiban utsukushii natsu* (Firefly Dreams), which was directed by John Williams. Surprisingly, she had also starred in an Indian Bollywood film (*Sakura-A Flower*). But for me the real star of *Tengu* is Ted Taylor. Having only little previous film experience, Ted did an outstanding job in the lead role. In real life, Ted works as a certified yoga teacher in Kyoto, but he is also a martial arts specialist, a big film buff, and a renowned blogger.



Can you tell me about some of the locations featured in *Tengu*?

From the beginning, I wanted to add a retro-look to *Tengu*. The look of the "Taisho roman" era (1912-1926) seemed adequate. It was a time when Western culture was widely introduced and assimilated into Japan, challenging the Japanese identity. This mixture of Western and traditional Japanese elements formed new styles in fashion, architecture, and art. Location-hunting is one of my passions, so I ventured out many times to look for buildings constructed in the Taisho era. I was very lucky to discover the train station in Shin Yokaichi [Shiga Prefecture] and the inn behind Hiyoshi Taisha in Hieizan Sakamoto [also Shiga]. The theatre where Mikami Kan performs is a now defunct Kaburenjo Geisha Theatre in Kyoto's Gojo Rakuen red-light district; it was built in the first year of Taisho.

Was it difficult getting permission to film the *maiko* and *geiko* who appear in the party scene?

We were really very fortunate that we could film the *maiko* and two *geiko* for *Tengu*. It was only possible through good connections and due to the fact that I am a foreign director. We had to assure them that the movie would not have a commercial cinematic release in Japan and that the geisha/*maiko* scene would be only documentary-style, with no dialogue. Of course, we had to hire them and pay the usual fee. It was quite expensive, but a dream come true for me.

Tengu will be screened in Osaka on March 8 and 13. See www.rowmuse.com for more info. For a complete version of this interview, see www.kto.co.jp