

TENGU – a film by Roger Walch

Red-faced and large-nosed, the Tengu is a Japanese nature spirit, dwelling in remote forests, eating raw meat, and teaching fighting skills to the famous warriors of history. Interestingly, there is speculation that the Tengu stories were derived from encounters with ship-wrecked European sailors, forced into hiding during Japan's period of isolation.

It is this aspect of the myth that film-maker Roger Walch seizes in a new hour-length feature film, and turns into an exploration of the modern ex-pat experience, as well as the power of dreams, mask and mystery in everyday life.

David (Ted Taylor), a student of Japanese legends, comes to Japan to meet the mysterious Professor Ozawa. But he never does – he is met by his assistant (Sakiko Ikegami), and taken to a quiet forest ryokan run by the alluring Sanae (Mimori Sento). At the station on the way there, the camera pans across three topless figures in fox-spirit masks, waiting alongside David, yet invisible to him. So begins a masterful creation of a dual reality – David's mundane introduction to Japanese customs and life, and a larger world of spirits, demons and dreams in which he obviously moves. The two worlds begin to intersect as it becomes increasingly clear that Professor Ozawa is not going to show, and David is fatefully enchanted by the presence of Sanae.

In Walch's previous film, 'Yuwaku 3', he explored a similar theme of the innocent abroad, when a hapless English teacher is entrapped into involuntary donating his organs to an ailing Kyoto man. That movie effectively combined humour and malice, and Tengu shares its thickening atmosphere of 'something's happening here but you don't know what it is' – a familiar feeling to many a foreigner who has lingered on these shores. It is clearly an aspect of cross-cultural life that Walch, a Kyoto resident from Switzerland, wants to explore, but here he mixes it with a sophisticated extra dimension – the idea that dreams and collective myths have a greater truth than

mundane experience. The use of traditional masks in the movie is quite brilliant – powerfully telling the story while effortlessly carrying its themes.

'Tengu' – shot on a low budget and using both professional and amateur actors and crew – could be better paced in its opening scenes, and the occasional dialogue is clunky, but the script, the art design, the use of settings and the cinematography all show that Walch is a writer / director with impressive skills, and original ideas.

A must-see for people interested in local art forged by the clash of East with West.

Reviewed by Miles Hitchcock