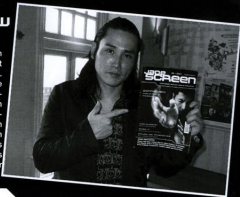


By Mike Fury

Born in 1975 in Ishikawa, Japan, renowned actor, director and action choreographer Tak Sakaguchi started as a feared underground street fighter with a reputation for using Martial Arts to beat down his opponents. He was later discovered by director Ryuhei Kitamura who cast him as the star of his low budget, action-horror film *Versus*, one of the earliest full-contact action films in Japan. This little film went on to become a cult action hit, selling over 100,000 copies in America and remains Kitamura's best-known work. Visiting London in May 2011 to promote the European Premiere of his new film, *Yakuza Weapon*, at the Terracotta Far East Film Festival, Tak also led a filmmaking master class and shared his experiences working in action cinema. He was kind enough to answer some questions looking back on his turbulent life and drop a few hints on what's next for Japanese cinema's undisputed badass.



Jade Screen: Tell us about your background and early life?

Tak Sakaguchi: I was bullied a little as a kid so I think this made me want to be a strong person when I grew up. I trained and aspired to be bigger and stronger. By the time I was around 10 I was beating up kids who were around 13 or 14! I also became involved in fighting throughout my teenage years, up until the age of 19 or so. But after doing this for a while I decided I didn't want to do it anymore and took more of an interest in film.

JS: You got your first big break in *Versus*, Director Ryuhei Kitamura was looking to cast the best local fighter. Before this happened, had you considered becoming an action star?

TS: It was a total coincidence and I had no idea I was going to be asked to star in a film. Luckily Kitamura wasn't looking for an actor as such, but a believable fighter to cast. In the local area around Shinjuku, Tokyo, I had a reputation as the toughest local streetfighter and everyone knew who I was. Kitamura came looking for potential talent to cast and at that time I was working on an independent film with Yûdai Yamaguchi. When I introduced myself to Kitamura he was shocked to find I was the fighter he'd heard so much about! This was the first time I met him.

JS: What was your impression of him?

TS: Actually the next time I saw him properly was in a bar and he was fighting with a huge German guy and smashing his head on the table! I was really scared! [Laughs]

JS: What was your experience like making *Versus*?

TS: The most difficult part was remembering the lines. When we recorded without sound I'd use techniques like have someone stand off-camera and read my lines to me. At the time I was a bit punch drunk so I found this part the most challenging.

JS: Coming from a practical streetfighting background, did you find the shift to fight choreography very difficult?

TS: When I was a streetfighter a lot of the techniques I used were comparably quite flashy and I incorporated a lot of Martial Arts into what I was doing. When I came to shoot action on camera, they pretty much shot me as I was, as in the kind of techniques and style that I already had. Back when I used to fight for real I would often compare my fights to movie fights and think 'what could I have done differently?' I also don't have any trouble pulling my punches during filming because that's just filmmaking and if you try, you can obviously control yourself. Having said that we didn't really employ those techniques for *Versus*, which was actually one of the first Japanese action films to show full-contact fight scenes!

JS: Later you made *Battlefield Baseball*, directed by Yûdai Yamaguchi, which became something of a 'cult' hit in the West. Why do you think audiences enjoyed this so much?

TS: Most of my fans are from America and Europe and I really appreciate their support. On *Battlefield Baseball*, I think it was a fun, crazy movie that a lot of people found entertaining, which is why audiences liked it. There aren't really any other action stars in Japan and I find that very disappointing. There should be more! I'm very grateful for all the support I receive from Western fans, if it wasn't for them, I doubt I'd be where I am now.

JS: You've worked on both low budget films like *Versus*, and blockbusters like *Shinobi*. Do you prefer the freedom of low budget filmmaking or the mass audiences of big budget films?

TS: *Shinobi* was an exception because I very rarely do films like that. I tend to prefer the low budget films because not only do you get more freedom but, for me, they feel far more real. Ultimately, I want to stay true to myself and show the style of action and filmmaking audiences have come to expect from me.

JS: Since we mentioned *Shinobi*, I'm curious to ask if you like video games?

TS: Yes, I love them! My favourite right now is *Red Dead Redemption!* [Laughs]

JS: Your directorial debut was *Sakigake!! Otokojuku* (aka: *Samurai School*). Was it difficult working in multiple roles as director, writer, actor and fight choreographer?

TS: I loved the original comic and so I wanted to turn it into a film. To be honest I wasn't really thinking about roles at that time and just went with the flow. This is how it turned out in the end and I had such a massive amount of fun making the film. As it was my first film as a director it was also very educational.

JS: Your latest film release is *Yakuza Weapon*. What was your inspiration behind this film?

TS: *Yakuza Weapon* is also based on a comic but with this project I also consciously wanted to make something completely outside the mainstream. I'm not recognised as a mainstream star and I like it that way so I wanted to do something even bigger and crazier than before! I think *Yakuza Weapon* achieves this!

JS: Tell us about your next film...

TS: My latest project is called *The Blood of Wolves*. It's bigger budget than my usual work, I'm excited because it's going to kickstart a new generation of chambera movies. I hate the Japanese film industry because it's all shit! [Laughs] I have the chance to bring something new to the table here and I can't wait for everyone to see it. It's due to be released next year.

JS: Thanks Tak for talking to us.

TS: No problem.