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YAKUZA PRINCESS

A film by Vicente Amorim

112 minutes / Brazil

Official Selection

Fantasia Fest – World Premiere

<http://www.magnetreleasing.com/yakuzaprincess/>

FINAL PRESS NOTES

Distributor Contact:

George Nicholis
Rebecca Fisher
Magnolia Pictures
(212) 924-6701 phone
publicity@magpictures.com

Press Contact LA/Nat'l:

David Magdael
Vince Johnson
David Magdael & Associates
dmagdael@tcdm-associates.com
vjohnson@tcdm-associates.com

Press Contact NY/Nat'l:

Ted Geoghegan
ted@dekanalog.com

SYNOPSIS

Set in the expansive Japanese community of Sao Paulo in Brazil — the largest Japanese diaspora in the world — *YAKUZA PRINCESS* follows Akemi (MASUMI), an orphan who discovers she is the heiress to half of the Yakuza crime syndicate. Forging an uneasy alliance with an amnesiac stranger (Rhys Meyers) who believes an ancient sword binds their two fates, Akemi must unleash war against the other half of the syndicate who wants her dead.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Yakuza Princess is a thriller with a very strong emotional drive. This drive is powered by Akemi, who comes of age while having to learn how to fight (quite literally) and becoming who she was always meant to be.

The film showcases a very complex, broken, family dynamic, with themes such as identity and belonging, the longing for (and rejection of) a father-figure as pivot points around which we see her trajectory unfold. *The Yakuza Princess* brings strong Japanese elements from the jidaigeki tradition of masters such as Mizoguchi or Kurosawa, the vibrant aesthetics of animes such as *Akira* and the violence derived from the new Ronin classics by Takashi Miike and Takeshi Kitano. As in those films, no punches are pulled. The Japanese neighborhood's settings in São Paulo play a major role in the choreography of chases, fights and shootouts. Brazil's own clique of the Yakuza, its corrupt police, and its own brand of domestic violence are present in the fringes of a greater, very elaborate, action canvas that will be grounded in the character's traits and will lead their arcs.

The sword heightens the film's supernatural tone. The Muramasa is at the heart of the quest Akemi has to go through. It is a cursed, blood-thirsty weapon, that when wielded by Akemi transforms her into a killing machine and, nonetheless, helps her bridge the gap into fulfilling her destiny, even if it has a (very) dark side to it.

In a movie where no one is really who they seem to be, we tell the story through reflections, transparencies and layers that veil and disguise the characters' every move. We have built a desaturated version of the 90s neon noir, without its corny excesses.

On one hand, we are welcome by a sense of familiarity and, on the other, like Akemi herself, we'll be waking from a long nightmare – one that we do not control, one that only Akemi can end with the power she discovers to have when the Muramasa (the cursed samurai sword) is in her hands.

INTERVIEW WITH THE PRODUCER TUBALDINI SHELLING (Filmland International)

Working for more than twenty years as producer and writer of short and feature films, Tubaldini Shelling graduated in Law, but soon understood his true passion was cinema. In 2006 he founded Filmland International production company, and since then has produced seven feature films acclaimed in Brazil and abroad, including the action thrillers **Motorrad** and **Yakuza Princess** - the latter will be released theatrically in US and most territories in Europe. Presently, he works on three new feature film projects, one of them for teen and YA audiences.

Tell us about the origins of the *Yakuza Princess* project. How has Filmland acquired the rights to Daniel Beyrouth's graphic novel? And how did you decide for Vicente Amorim to direct it?

When Danilo told me he wanted to write the story, I was delighted. I gave him all the support in the writing process, because a graphic novel like that is very rare in Brazil. As for the adaptation, Vicente came to my mind in a very natural way. We had already made *Motorrad* together. Besides, he has a very profound relationship with the Japanese culture.

How did you raise up the production and the budget? Was it a complicated film to make – many locations, cameras, rehearsals, fight choreographies?

It was a big production, with many action sequences and special effects involved. One of the great challenges was to find Asian stunts in Brazil. Since we couldn't find them, we invested on a three-month training to have the best team. As there were many locations and action sequences, the film demanded a huge structure, and a big crew. To shoot a genre film like this, we need lots of cameras and moving equipment. The film has started as an international project, since it has actors from all over the world, but the production is majorly Brazilian.

The samurai film is a very popular genre all over the world. How was to transpose it to the city of São Paulo and the neighborhood of Liberdade?

Brazil is many nations in one. It is in our roots the mix of races and people from several places. We have in Brazil the biggest Japanese community outside Japan, with all the wonderful aspects involved, especially when a so different culture adapts to a country like ours. There was an old advertising tagline in Brazil which said: "Our Japanese are better than the other ones!". They are a fantastic people.

How was casting? Was it easy or complex having talents such as Jonathan Rys-Meyers, Masumi, Tsuyoshi Ohara?

Having talents that big requires a very professional and coordinated structure. Jonathan has a Golden Globe, and Tsuyoshi is one of the biggest stars in Japan. All the process was easy-going for one reason: all of them were deeply in love with the project.

How are you thinking the releasing strategy for the film internationally with new Covid context in many countries?

The Covid pandemic is finally losing force in many countries, something that still didn't happen in Brazil (*up to May 2021*). In some other territories, theaters are reopening – we closed a theatrical release deal in the biggest markets. It is amazing how an international feature film, made in Brazil, has been earning so much approval abroad. That says a lot about the Brazilian talents' ability to compete on a global scale.

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

VICENTE AMORIM - Director

Vicente Amorim is one of the most acclaimed Brazilian directors today. He has helmed ten feature films and five TV series. He has debuted as a director with the feature **The Middle Of The World** (2003). Among his films are the international **A Good Man** (2008), starring Viggo Mortensen; and the action thrillers **Motorrad** (2017) and **The Division** (2020), the latter also adapted for a TV series. **Yakuza Princess** is his second feature film with an international cast and crew. Presently, he is in post-production of his third international feature, the drama **Duetto**, shot in Brazil and Italy, with a mixed cast including Michelle Morrone (365 Days) and Giancarlo Giannini (007 – Quantum of Solace).

GUSTAVO HADBA - Cinematography

One of the most acclaimed cinematographers in Brazil, Gustavo Hadba has more than 70 credits in film, TV and documentary. Internationally renowned, he has been nominated to News & Documentary Emmy and awarded at the Los Angeles Brazilian Film Festival for the features **Venice** and **Acqua Movie** (2019).

Among his main works in Brazil are **Lula, The Son of Brazil** (2009), **Bróder** (2010) and the international production **Amazonia** (2013). Gustavo has also worked as camera operator in big-budget Hollywood productions such as **The Incredible Hulk** (2008) and **Fast Five** (2011).

Yakuza Princess is his fifth collaboration with helmer Vicente Amorim, after features such as **Motorrad** (2007) and **The Division** (2020).

“Vicente and I know each other for many years, since I was a camera operator for shorts films and TV shows and he was an assistant director. We acknowledge in each other the discipline, experience, creativity and the disposition for work – and, whenever one of these virtues is lacking in one of us, the other comes to aid. To shoot *Yakuza Princess*, I looked for the Bruce Lee inside me, since I went to the movies as a kid to see *Enter the Dragon* (1973).

For the combat scenes, we did a million rehearsals and always shot with two cameras. While the first one focused on the combat itself, I operated the second one, with the freedom to search for new and original angles. And so we created our 3D images, our own private videogame.

To shoot the city of São Paulo, we searched hyper-realism in lights. It was not the real São Paulo, but a Japanese city from graphic novels, closer to the Tokyo or Osaka we have in our collective imaginary. All that was possible thanks to the new LED lights which allow us to create our own film lights”.

DANILO BEYROUGH – Author of the Graphic Novel

One of the best graphic novel authors in Brazil, Danilo Beyrouth was born in São Paulo and was first acclaimed for the publishing of his character **Necronaut**, a hero whose mission is transporting the dead’s souls. In 2010, he published his first graphic novel, **Bando de Dois** (Band of Two), about the last survivors of a group of cangaço bandits. For the work, he has won the HQ Mix Awards in three categories – Best Designer, Author and Especial Edition. He was also awarded for the graphic novel series on **The Astronaut**, created by Brazilian cartoonist Mauricio de Sousa.

In 2017, Danilo had his first experience in cinema signing the concept art and creation of characters for the action thriller **Motorrad** –his first collaboration with director Vicente Amorin and Filmland International production company.

In 2018, he has published through DarkSide Books the graphic novel **Samurai Shirô**, whose rights were acquired by Filmland for the motion picture **Yakuza Princess**.

“I decided to tell a fantasy story about the presence of the Yakuza Japanese mob in Brazil – a fantasy inside Brazilian reality. Friends and readers always remark I have a cinematic style of telling stories. That can be really useful to movies, to the adventure genre, to action scenes in general, and also to the dramatic ones.”

CAST BIOGRAPHIES

MASUMI - Akemi, the Yakuza Princess

Akemi is a young woman living a quiet life in the neighborhood of Liberdade in São Paulo city, Brazil. One day, she starts to be chased by mysterious Japanese gangsters who want her head. That is when she finds out to be the heiress of a great Yakuza empire. She will have to find inside herself the strength and courage to fight against enemies she would never imagine would be after her.

MASUMI is a child of both Japan and the US. Born in Palos Verdes, California, her formative years saw her move between Tokyo, New York, Washington DC, and finally Dallas - where she began her singing and songwriting career. After a short period in Japan, she enrolled in the Los Angeles College of Music. Masumi has performed internationally in Sweden, NY, Italy, Tokyo.

In 2019, she has started her acting career and was offered the title role in the Warner Brothers film, "Yakuza Princess" – her first feature and also her first protagonist role – in which she speaks both English and Japanese.

“When I was reading the manga, I really felt that story was for me. I felt like I was going to the same journey Akemi was going through. Akemi doesn’t know where she belongs in this world; she doesn’t know her purpose in life. She doesn’t feel like a powerful individual. And then crazy things happen which almost take her life away... and that’s when she realizes her power. I connect to that because I felt I didn’t quite belong neither in Japan nor in America; I didn’t know what my purpose was, for a long time.”

JONATHAN RHYS MEYERS - Shiro

An anglo-looking man wakes up bedridden in a foreign hospital, his face sliced into pieces and with a katana sword in his hands. He looks in the mirror, but he doesn’t know who he is, how he got there or even his name. Shiro was an international hitman, a contract killer working for the highest bidder. He was also the assassin who killed Akemi’s grandfather and was payed to kill her. But, amnesiac, he can’t remember anything. He has an ancient sword and Akemi, the young Yakuza Princess, as the only clues to his past.

Irish actor **Jonathan Rhys Meyers** has more than 60 credits in his filmography. He has been first noticed in cult films such as Todd Hayne's **Velvet Goldmine** (1998) and Woody Allen's **Match Point** (2005) and in the blockbuster **Mission: Impossible III** (2006).

On TV, he has won a Golden Globe for his Elvis Presley performance in the miniseries **Elvis** (2005). He has also been acclaimed as King Henry VIII in the TV series **The Tudors** (2007), which earned him two Golden Globe nominations, and as Bishop Heahmund in the TV series **Vikings** (2017). He will be seen as historical figure James Brook in the adventure drama **Edge of the World** and will star opposite John Malkovich in the action thriller **The Survivalist**.

“From Shiro’s point of view, everything is new because he has had an unfortunate accident and can’t remember very much about it, or what he’s doing, or why he is in São Paulo. He is a lost person. For me, it wasn’t that hard to play somebody who is lost – I’ve never been to Brazil before, I never shot in São Paulo, so I could embrace all this. It was a complicated shoot – we had six weeks of night shootings. So the fact that everybody kept their spirits up to make it to the end was very good.”

TSUYOSHI IHARA - Takeshi

Takeshi is an obstinate and faithful man. For twenty years he has been serving the Oyabun who killed his friend and master, Akemi’s father, all this time waiting, hoping that the time would come where he would be able to bring her back to Osaka to oust Ken’Ichi, the usurper, and reinstate the Kawa dynasty through the young woman, the Yakuza Princess.

Since 1983, Osaka born Tsuyoshi Ihara has spread his work span to movies and television dramas and has been taking on various roles and performances.

He made his Hollywood debut in Clint Eastwood’s **Letters from Iwojima** (2006), and proved he was skillful at sword fighting through his performance in Takashi Miike’s **13 Assassins** (2011). Other credits include the Japanese-French production **Ramen Shop** (2018), by Eric Khoo.

Tsuyoshi had previously worked with helmer Vicente Amorim in the war drama **Dirty Hearts** (2011), for which he won the Best Actor prize at Punta del Este International Film Festival (Uruguay). In June 2021, he will be joining the second season of the most popular Netflix Japan series **Naked Director**.

“Before Yakuza Princess, I have had many experiences with the action genre in my actor’s career. That part was easy, but shooting every night scene from evening to morning was very hard for my body (*laughs*). The work was very fun, and all the Brazilian staff was very kind. They created a very comfortable atmosphere for an actor.”

CREDITS

Director: Vicente Amorim
Producers: Tubaldini Shelling, André Skaf
Cinematography: Gustavo Hadba
Editor: Danilo Lemos
Original score: Lucas Marcier e Fabiano Krieger
Production designer: Daniel Flaksman
Costume designer: Cristina Kangussu
Make-up designer: Martín Macías Trujillo
Action coordinator: Agnaldo Bueno
Sound mixer: Leandro Lima
Special effects supervisor: Sergio Farjalla Jr.
3D animator: Fabricio Navarro
Executive producers: Nate Bolotin, Todd Brown, Brent Travers, David Atlan Jackson
Co-producers: Magali Assenço, Alexandre Rocha, Marcelo Pedrazzi

Akemi – Masumi
Shirô – Jonathan Rhys Meyers
Takeshi – Tsuyoshi Ihara
Kojiro – Eijiro Ozaki
Taxista – Kenny Leu
Chiba – Toshiji Takeshima
Senhora Tsugahara – Mariko Takai
Wallace – Nicholas Trevijano
Tulio – Iuri Saraiva
César – Ricardo Gelli
Samara – Nduduzo Siba
Armond – Charles Paraventi
Doutor – André Ramiro
Toshiro – Toshi Tanaka