

THE FIRST BREATH OF TENGAN REI

LOCAL FILMMAKERS RETURN WITH POWERFUL MEDITATION ON RETRIBUTION

By T.T. Stern-Enzi

The union of cultures and styles between Wright State University alum Junko Kajino and Antioch College graduate Ed Koziarski began in the Miami Valley in 1997. The filming of *The First Breath of Tengan Rei*, extended that union across the globe, reaching from the United States to Japan.

This *Breath* also bears a connection with recent Academy Award nominee *The Reader* in its embrace of claiming responsibility for past crimes and the development of interpersonal relationships between those on opposing sides.

Here, the crime is the rape of Tengan Rei (Erika Oda), a young Okinawan girl by a couple of American soldiers (Sean Nix and Ric Arthur). A decade later, Tengan journeys to the U.S. and kidnaps Paris (Katori Eason), the teenage son of Nelson (Nix), intending to use the boy as a pawn in her final

confrontation with the two men.

Kajino and Koziarski carefully disclose the story of the rape and the impact of the crime on the relationship between father and son, building tension, but it is the evolving dynamic between Tengan and Paris that defines the narrative and also draws comparisons to the aforementioned post-Holocaust drama. Much like Hanna (Kate Winslet) and Michael (David Kross) in *The Reader*, Tengan and Paris are the ones forced to navigate the trickier waters of coming to terms with past sins, while speeding headlong towards a showdown with Nelson. The growing intimacy is not as sexually charged in *Breath*, but the

storm clouds loom. And it's a testament to the filmmakers that they never directly push this angle. By choosing a more subtle approach, they force audiences to consider the emotional



Erika Oda in
The First Breath of Tengan Rei
grade: B+ Not Rated

fallout on the psyches of Tengan and Paris. *Breath* bears the DNA imprint of the kind of psychological drama Hollywood routinely sells its soul to produce, especially for release during the awards season. Its mix of race and culture would definitely attract enough starpower to generate buzz to keep things humming along a run-up to Oscar night. But by focusing

on African-American and Asian characters, Kajino and Koziarski steer the narrative away from a path that even most indie projects would take to build a sizeable niche audience. Of course, this illustrates a commitment to a truth in the dynamic that is not often spoken aloud – the struggles between minority peoples who remain largely invisible in the larger context.

And we, in the region, now have a commitment to embrace Kajino and Koziarski and their vision as a fine example of the daring filmmakers developing in our midst. Here in the Midwest, we are concerned about being overlooked by the greater filmmaking communities on either coast, but at present, we have the opportunity to support a pair of voices rising from the quietest of whispers to provocative screams.