

Invited 2004:
Sundance Film Festival, SXSW Film Festival, Brussels International Festival
of Fantastic Films, 20th Amsterdam Fantastic Film Festival, Melbourne International Film Festival,
Boston Film Festival, Philadelphia Film Festival,
Gold Coast Film Fantastic Film Festival ...



From the ravages of war rises the ultimate assassin

AZUMI

R Medium Level Violence
114 minutes

www.easterneye.com.au

Directed by Ryuhei Kitamura
Starring Aya Ueto

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SYNOPSIS

Orphaned in 19th century war-torn Tokugawa Shogun period of Japan, Azumi is found and raised along with nine other orphans, by their mentor, Ji. The Shogun, sickened by innocent lives lost in senseless warfare, has commissioned Ji to cultivate assassins that eliminate warlords before they strike.

After 10 years of inconceivably harsh training and discipline, Azumi and her comrades have been moulded into invincible warriors, now eagerly awaiting instructions from Ji to demonstrate their skills. But first they must pass their final and most difficult test.

"An assassin has no choice but to fulfil his mission, however cruel or extreme," says their mentor. "This is your ultimate test. You must kill your partner, or be killed."

Azumi is stupefied. She and her partner, Nachi, have developed a special bond but have no choice; they must accept their terrible fate and fight until only one of them survives.

Azumi is victorious.

With heavy hearts, Azumi and the four other survivors of that final test, Ukiha, Hyuga, Amagi and Nagara, venture out into the vast world beyond their secluded valley.

Their first mission is to assassinate the powerful warlords Nagamasa Asano and Kiyomasa Katoh, rebel heads of the old Toyotomi force. They accomplish this mission and then journey on, meeting Yae, a beautiful travelling entertainer who captures the heart of Hyuga. For a brief moment, their spirits are lifted and burdens lightened.

Until, that is, they discover that the infamous warlord Kiyomasa, supposedly assassinated, had in fact been replaced by a double. His comrade enlists a cadre of counter assassins to eliminate Azumi and her friends. Yae and her crew, who are travelling with Azumi, are mistakenly attacked as part of this onslaught.

Burdened with her cruel fate, to kill friends and enemies alike, and sacrifice innocent lives, Azumi begins to question her actions. But Kiyomasa leaves neither room nor time for self-doubt as his trap ensnares Azumi and her group. She forges on, unaware of the terrible bloodshed that lies ahead...

BACKGROUND

Serialized since 1994, "Azumi", a comic by Yu Koyama, has developed an avid following, shocking from the onset and seizing readers with its audacious scale, as well as extreme depictions of violence and cruelty. Since its introduction 8 years ago, the highly popular "Azumi" has sold over 8.5 million copies and has won the Grand Prix Award in the first Cultural Agency's Media Arts Festival in the Comics Category, as well as the Shogakukan Comics Award (1998), both very prestigious literary awards in Japan.

Although many screenwriters attempted to adapt this work to film, its radical yet somehow noble perspective, highly individualistic characters, and sheer scale thwarted successful adaptations until now. But in the 2000 Yubari Film Festival, producer Mataichiro Yamamoto encountered *Versus*, a film that shocked him with its speedy action scenes and savagely violent imagery. *Versus* screened at several international film festivals, winning critical acclaim and landing director Ryuhei Kitamura a contract with Miramax Films.

Yamamoto immediately met with the film's director, Ryuhei Kitamura, convinced that he alone could bring the spirit of "Azumi" to life on the big screen. And Kitamura, in turn, was convinced that the starring role should be played by Aya Ueto, inspired by her natural, yet powerful portrayal of a young girl struggling with her sexual identity in the popular TV drama "San-nen B-Gumi Kimpachi Sensei."

"Azumi" is supported by a charismatic cast including Hirotaka Narimiya of TV drama "Kokou Kyoshi" (High School Teacher), Kenji Kohashi of musical "Okepi" (Orchestra Pit), Takatoshi Kaneko of "Waterboys" (2001), Joe Odagiri as the counter assassin, and theater actors Minoru Matsumoto and Hideo Sakaki. Screen veterans include Yoshio Harada as Azumi's mentor, Masato Ibu as Azumi's first assassination target, Naoto Takenaka as Azumi's foe Kiyomasa Katoh, and Kei Sato as the monk, Tenkai.

With his star-studded cast, Kitamura aspires to "make a period film classic – akin to an Akira Kurosawa film in epic sweep and heightened adventure". "I want to dazzle the world with the Japanese swordfight."

EPIC FINALE, HOMAGE TO KUROSAWA

Akira Kurosawa's "Seven Samurai", "Yojimbo" and "Kagemusha" are considered hallmarks of the Japanese period film. With **Azumi** Kitamura strives to honour the pure, large-scale entertainment of such films with the finale, in which Azumi single-handedly takes on over 200 samurai in an epic and unforgettable battle sequence.

Hundreds of actors skilled in sword fighting were recruited from Tokyo and Kyoto, and pitted against Aya Ueto. With a dancer's grace and style, Ueto hardly used a stunt double in filming this final battle scene, which is at once ethereal and precisely calculated for powerful realism. This impressive sequence required two weeks to shoot.

DIRECTOR RYUHEI KITAMURA

Azumi director Ryuhei Kitamura is internationally acclaimed for his speedy action scenes and powerful camera work.

Kitamura began his career by creating the film group Napalm Films, after returning to Japan from Australia where he attended the School for Visual Arts. His debut action/horror film *Down to Hell*, which was produced with a mere staff of six and a \$3,000 budget, won the Grand Prix at the first Indie Film Festival. He later made his theatrical debut with *Heat After Dark*, starring and produced by Atsuro Watabe.

Kitamura's first feature-length film *Versus* (2001) drew worldwide attention, and 2002 saw the release of *The Messenger*, which was featured in the short film omnibus *Jam Films. Alive*, a science fiction film based on the work of popular animator Tsutomu Takahashi, was released in Japan in 2002, while *Aragami*, a collaborative work with director Yukihiro Tsutsumi, as well as *Sky High* and **Azumi**, were released in 2003. All have become cult hits in Japan.

CREDIT LIST

Director Ryuhei Kitamura
Based on the comic "Azumi" by Yu Koyama (Big Comic Superior, Shogakukan)

Cast

Azumi	Aya Ueto
Nachi	Shun Oguri
Ukiha	Hiroki Narimiya
Hyuga	Kenji Kohashi
Amagi	Takatoshi Kaneko
Nagara	Yuma Ishigaki
Master Gessai	Yoshio Harada

Nagato (ninja)
Nagamasa Asano
Kiyomasa Kato
Kanbei Inoue
Saru
Bijomaru Mogami
Yae

Hideo Sakaki
Masato Ibu
Naoto Takenaka
Kazuki Kitamura
Minoru Matsumoto
Joe Odagiri
Aya Okamoto

Screenplay
Executive Producers

Rikiya Mizushima, Isao Kiriya
Morihiro Kodama, Sumio Kiga
Osamu Kamei, Naoyuki Sakagami

Co-Executive Producers
Producers

Kazuya Hamana, Nobuyuki Tohya
Mataichiro Yamamoto, Toshiaki Nakazawa

Co-Producer

Hidemi Satani

Line Producer

Toshihiro Ohsato

Supervising Production Designer

Yoshinobu Nishioka

Cinematographer

Takumi Furuya

Lighting Director

Toshihide Kohsaka

Sound Recordist

Yoshiya Obara

Production Designer

Yuji Hayashida

Film Editor

Shuichi Kakesu

Music Producer

Taro Iwashiro

Featuring the Song "NEGAI" Performed by Mina Ganaha (FLME)

Original Soundtrack Available on FOR LIFE MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT

"Azumi" Production Committee

NIPPON HERALD FILMS – TBS – DENTSU – SHOGAKUKAN - AMUSE PICTURES –
TOHO – IMAGICA - SEDIC INTERNATIONAL - TRISTONE ENTERTAINMENT

Distributed in Japan by TOHO

Co-Distributed by NIPPON HERALD FILMS

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QUOTES FOR AZUMI

<http://sundance.weblogsinc.com/entry/2488485627438141/>

Just watched a screener of Azumi, a kick-butt Samurai flick

by Jason Calacanis

. After we got off the slopes and to of the hot tub yesterday we popped in the screener for Azumi. It's a non-stop, action-packed tribute to Kurosawa's Yojimbo and the Seven Samurai. I'll be writing up a review shortly.....

<http://movies.yahoo.com/upcoming/>

Greg Schmitz, Yahoo Movies

AZUMI #1

Anyway, here's a summary ofI ended up only seeing 22 films....., here are my 18 favorites, in order, from "awesome" to "great" to "good". The bottom seven will go unmentioned:

#1 'Azumi' (This consistently funny, action-packed adventure about a Japanese female assassin during the time of samurais and ninjas is one of the most entertaining movies I've seen in years, and really makes me want to see the director's most popular film, [Versus](#). 'Azumi' is currently the movie that I'll be judging the rest of this year's movies against... why hasn't anyone picked this movie up yet? I don't have a preview page for this hilarious, yet gore-filled, action movie up, but I will soon, because I'm taking on this movie as a pet project in 2004 as a movie I want more people to know about.)

#2 [Napoleon Dynamite](#), #3 [Garden State](#), #4 'CSA: Confederate States of America' (Presented like a British television documentary, complete with fake, **#5 'Super Size Me'** (In this comic documentary which follows in the director-as-star, **#6 'The Return'** (This international festival hit from Russia, **#7 [The Woodsman](#)**

#8 'I Like Killing Flies' Quirky and hunger-inducing, this documentary was surprisingly robbed at the fest's awards., **#9 [The Butterfly Effect](#), #10 'Riding Giants'** (The second sports documentary from

#14 [We Don't Live Here Anymore](#), #15 'Zatoichi' (Japanese director classic tale of a blind samurai warrior If you're looking for a pure action movie, you're going to be disappointed redeemed, surprisingly, by its musical numbers

<http://efilmcritic.com/review.php?movie=8553>

SCREENED AT THE 2004 SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL:

"You simply won't believe how many villains this woman kills."

- Scott Weinberg

While staring at my "Must-See" Checklist for the festival, it was Takeshi Kitano's remake of "Zatoichi" that had me most intrigued, Asian-flick-Action-wise, anyway. And while "Z" turned out to be a pretty big disappointment, my evening was salvaged by this one, the previously overlooked and wholly stunning "Azumi".

Azumi is just over two hours long. I watched it 1.75 times. I'm still not entirely sure what the plot is about, but I do know one thing:

If long, fluid sequences of amazingly ass-kicking swordplay; scenes that last a long time and build momentum with each successive neck-slashing; expansive and majestic displays of astonishingly exciting carnage; nearly all of it committed by a dainty-looking Asian lovely who looks no more threatening than a baby deer...

And **Azumi** is quite simply a **whole lotta cool**. Directed by the relative newcomer who also gave us

greedy Gorehounds that Karate/Horror hybrid known as **Versus**, and absolutely laden with the sort of high-flying hysterics that Hollywood simply doesn't produce anymore....

Why not? Too damn violent! And in an industry where **Bad Boys 2** is considered a 'good action movie'... Bah, I digress.

Azumi is our heroine. As played by Aya Ueto, she's both achingly beautiful and simply deadly to fight against. This is no "whack the bad guy with a crate" sort of *Charlie's Angels* confection. Azumi is simply faster and better with a sword than anyone. And damn if she doesn't prove it about 475 times.

The plot is a collection of feudal squabbles and Shogun Assassins. All you need to know is that Azumi is the good guy (gal) and she has a few sidekicks. Everyone else is food for the sword. And Azumi's sword gets fed a lot.

Ryuhei Kitamura's directorial sense is, at least in the action scenes (which comprise perhaps 60% of the film), resoundingly exciting and consistently cool. CGI is applied on special occasions, yet those moments of trickery are dwarfed by the sheer spectacle of characters in motion. It's like you're at the ballet, only with swords and several severed jugulars.

For a pure ice-water jolt of action-movie insanity, few things I've seen in recent years come close to the sheer splatter-fest spectacle of "Azumi". I may not know a whole lot about Japanese cinema, but I know a phenomenal action sequence when I see one. And this movie's got, like, 7 of 'em.

[Scott Weinberg](#) - 01/26/04 21:00:07