



Kao

Face

Junji Sakamoto

JAPAN, 2000

123 minutes ■ Colour/35mm

Production Company: **Kuho**

Producer: **Yukiko Shii**

Screenplay: **Junji Sakamoto, Isamu Uno**

Cinematographer: **Norimichi Kasamatsu**

Editor: **Toshihide Fukano**

Production Designer: **Mitsuo Harada**

Sound: **Fumio Hashimoto**

Music: **Coba**

Principal Cast: **Naomi Fujiyama,
Masako Yoshimura**

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The fact that Junji Sakamoto's extraordinary new film is about a woman may not seem particularly notable. But this impressive essay on how one woman finds freedom, featuring the finest work by a Japanese actress in recent memory, comes from a man famous for his obsessive interest in the world of men. In Sakamoto's transformed aesthetic, the macho layers of toughness, pathos and all-consuming revenge in *Knock Out*, *Tokarev* and *The Goofball* now becomes a particularly feminine struggle for redemption and self-respect.

Masako is an awkward, withdrawn, middle-aged woman who kills her sister in an explosion of pent-up humiliation and rage. She stumbles into a fugitive life, haunted by guilt, yet for the first time taking charge of her own actions. Her encounters with men, based on rape and extortion, would be dispiriting to some but only energize her. Her first job outside her parents' dry cleaning business, in a "love hotel," is not much fun either. But she survives, proud of what she has accomplished. When the law draws closer, she is forced to flee again, this time to the southern town of Beppu where she finds work in a bar and begins to fall in love with a broken man. This, the happiest time in her life, ends suddenly and she must face her last challenge on a remote island.

This odyssey might be depressing in other hands but Sakamoto is so adept at discovering humour in the darkest places that we

find ourselves laughing sympathetically through awful moments of humiliation. He is greatly assisted by Naomi Fujiyama, Japan's most important stage actress making her screen debut. Her performance gradually reveals uncomfortable truths about the human condition in a gentle, perfectly modulated way.

■ **Noah Cowan**

Junji Sakamoto was born in Sakai, Japan in 1958. His feature debut, *Knock Out* (89), was a huge success in Japan, and his subsequent films have gone on to win international awards. Selected filmography: *Iron Fist* (90), *Checkmate* (91), *Tokarev* (93), *Boxer Joe* (94), *Biliken* (96), *Scarred Angels* (97), *The Goofball* (98) and *Face* (00).

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