

# RAFU SHIMPO

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Chris Tashima, left, and Sab Shimono, portray father and son in Eric Byler's independent film "American Knees"

## Indie Film Puts Asian Males in the Front Seat

'American Knees' tells of romance and passion between Asian Americans.

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In the independent feature film "American Knees," director Eric Byler invites his audience to unravel, through flashbacks, private moments and sensual encounters, the mystery of an Asian American love story.

For actor Chris Tashima, who plays Raymond Ding, the film's Asian American romantic lead, "American Knees" is much more than that.

"As an actor, there's so many things I have never been able to do, and that I've never seen in a film," said Tashima, on location in Altadena, during the last day of filming. "To have love scenes with two different women... it's a very significant project in that sense. It's groundbreaking."

Groundbreaking in the sense that when you look up Hollywood's definition of "Asian male," the words "sensual encounters" and "love story" are nowhere to be found.

Instead, words like "nerdy" and "sexless" can best describe Asian males in the vast majority of Hollywood movies. Typically appearing in marginal roles, they are most often laughed at, mocked and humiliated. The rest have been mar-

tial artists or Asian gangsters

In film, a character's journey is what carries the picture, a human journey audiences connect to, root for and follow from beginning to end. For Asian males in Hollywood, however, that journey has been seen through the eyes of a dependable sidekick at best, rarely if ever as a lead. A romantic lead? Forget it.

But with the recent rise of Asian American independent filmmakers, Asian American actors can now portray themselves as they really are—American born and raised, with the same wants, needs and desires as anyone else—and show the world that Asian Americans can not only play romantic leads in the movies, they can be absolutely sexy in the process.

It's about time, said Sab Shimono, a 40-year veteran actor who plays Wood Ding, Tashima's father in the film.

"Now we're writing it, producing it and shooting it. It's amazing," said Shimono.

Adapted from the novel written by Shawn Wong and produced by award-winning producer Lisa Onodera, "American Knees" has been described as a "seductive and smart romance between a Chinese American man and an Amerasian woman torn apart by racial pressures, but drawn together by enduring passion."

The film has drawn a talented and well-known cast including Academy Award-winning filmmaker Tashima

("Visak and Virtue"), Allison Sie, Joan Chen ("The Last Emperor"), Kelly Hu ("X-Men II United"), Ben Shenkman, Shimono and Michael Paul Chan ("Joy Luck Club").

The complex love story focuses on Raymond, a 40-something divorcee who sneaks in and "lives" in the apartment he once shared with his ex-girlfriend Aurora (Sie) when she is not there. Aurora, meanwhile, has moved on to a new boyfriend, Steve (Shenkman), the "perfect" Caucasian guy. Raymond begins a passionate affair with Betty (Chen), a Vietnamese woman more "Asian" than he is, who masks deep emotional and physical scars.

Though both Raymond and Aurora have new mates to match their ideals, they cannot resist each other, and each finds different ways to stay connected, despite protest from meddling friends.

Written and directed by Eric Byler, "American Knees" is his third feature-length film. His first, "Charlotte Sometimes" (2003), garnered two Independent Spirit Award nominations including the John Cassavetes Award for Best Feature (under \$500,000) and Best Supporting Actress for Jacqueline Kim.

Byler, who is half Caucasian, half Chinese, was inspired by Wong's 1996 novel depicting an unapologetically sexy Asian American man and three complex, multi-layered women.

"Shawn Wong did a marvelous job  
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## Knees

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of touching on the broader issues that a multiracial person faces, and this inspired me to go a bit deeper," said Byler.

With a firm grasp of the material, Byler was able to write the screenplay and bring to his direction a sensitivity and a clear vision of what he wanted, which he passed on to his leading man, Tashima.

"Raymond is trying to figure out the relationships in his life—most directly involving a girl he just broke up with and a new woman he just meets," said Tashima of his character. "He's trying to find his place in this stage of his life."

To prepare for this role and "taking off his shirt" on screen, Tashima took it upon himself to lose 34 lbs. in a little over three months.

On the last day of shooting, however, he splurged and had pancakes for breakfast and cheesecake for dessert during lunch. Now that the shoot is over, he said he's not looking forward to one particular food, "Just more of it."

For Tashima, though, losing weight was a small price to pay for a role of a lifetime.

"If this film goes as planned, this part will be a great showcase," he said. "It will open people's minds to the idea that an Asian American can be the star of a movie. That's why this project is so significant."

"American Knees" will be finished in the Fall of 2005 and Onodera hopes for a 2006 release. For more information, call Lisa Onodera at (310) 315-0540.