

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Aiki</b>
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	2002 Sep 09
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	31-32
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Aiki, Tengan, Daisuke, 2002

# AIKI

(JAPAN)

A Nikkatsu Corp. presentation of a Nikkatsu Corp./VAP/Eisei Gekiko/Rentrak Japan/Kobi/Imagica/Caprice Bridge production. (International sales: Nikkatsu Corp., Tokyo.) Produced by Hisa Iino, Yasushi Matsuda, Shunsuke Koga. Executive producer, Masaya Nakamura.

Directed, written by Daisuke Tengan. Camera (color), Yi Yi-Shu; editor, Hirohide Abe; music, Meina Co.; art director, Masao Inagaki; sound, Masato Yano. Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (New Territories), Aug. 30, 2002. (Also in Toronto, Vancouver Film Festivals.) Running time: 119 MIN.

Taichi ..... Haruhiko Kato  
Samako ..... Rie Tomosaka  
Hiraishi "Sensei" ..... Ryo Ishibashi

By DAVID ROONEY

**I**ngredients that could have been the stuff of generic movie-of-the-week sentimentality are given depth and a more subtle emotional yield in "Aiki," in which an ancient martial arts discipline becomes the path to self-acceptance and spiritual rebirth. Somewhat long-winded initially, but steadily more interesting as it develops, this drama of a paraplegic former boxer's difficult journey from anger and self-pity

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to a point where he can once again stand tall is satisfyingly resolved without resorting to syrupy artificial uplift. Based on a true story, the film's human interest angle should land it foreign-language television dates after completing festival rounds.

Director-writer Daisuke Tengan is the son of Shohei Imamura and co-scripter of the veteran helmer's recent films including "The Eel" and "Warm Water Under a Red Bridge," as well as screenwriter of "Audition," arguably prolific filmmaker Miike Takashi's best work to date. Tengan's background in particular on his father's films would appear to be instrumental in his skill at shaping this involving human drama, uncluttered by the kind of unruly narrative tangents that often compromise the accessibility of new Japanese cinema.

Nicely cut opening shows a boxing match at which young hot-head Taichi (Haruhiko Kato) trounces his opponent, followed by a motorcycle collision in which he suffers severe spinal injuries. Emerging from a coma in hospital, Taichi learns he will be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life, and begins a steady descent into despair and resentment. He contemplates suicide while alienating all those around him, including his devoted girlfriend.

A year later, Taichi's insurance settlement is disappearing fast as he spends his time drunk and aggressive, shrugging off the concern of his well-meaning sister. When he's beaten up by thugs after intervening in an attempted rape, Taichi meets a racketeer who admires his courage and sets him up with a job at a lottery stall.

Motivated by the friendship of Samako (Rie Tomosaka), a care-free young woman who helps him attract customers and accepts him for what he is, Taichi attempts to resume boxing training and then karate, but is turned away from both disciplines. By chance, he sees a demonstration of aiki-jujutsu, a nonviolent martial art requiring physical strength, supple movement, speed and minimal action—as well as spirit—to control the opponent. Signing up with aikido master Sensei (Ryo Ishibashi), Taichi learns skills that enable him not only to regain his dignity but to re-engage in life and pursue his romantic feelings for Samako.

While the opening hour detailing Taichi's hospital spell begs to be tightened, the drama comes into its own as the paraplegic hits rock bottom and then slowly identifies an unexpected avenue to climb back up.

Pushing the right emotional buttons without too obviously milking sentiment, the screenplay makes eloquent points about a society with little use for, or even tolerance of, weakness or handicap.

Tengan's straightforward, commercial cinema approach is matched by an austere, unembellished camera style and understated, sympathetic work from the key cast.

End credits carry footage of the real-life Dutch paraplegic aikido exponent who inspired the film.