



# LITTLE ROCK

a film by mike ott



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**Tagline**

The American dream lies in a history of heartbreak.

**Synopsis**

When her car breaks down on a site-seeing tour of California, a Japanese student winds up stranded in a small desert town. Exhilarated by a sudden sense of freedom, she extends her stay and finds friendship, romance, and what promises to be a new home. But as she pulls back the layers on this unlikely paradise, she discovers a different America than the one in her dreams.

**Writer/Director Mike Ott's Bio**

Mike Ott studied under Thom Andersen at the California Institute of the Arts where he received his Masters of Fine Arts degree in Film and Video. Mike has directed music videos for such bands as Pretty Girls Make Graves, The Blood Brothers and The Cave Singers. Mike's first

feature film, *Analog Days*, world premiered in the narrative competition at the Los Angeles Film Festival in 2006 and has since gone on to screen at festivals around the world (Vienna, Mar Del Plata, IndieLisboa, Ljubljana, etc). His last short film, *A. Effect* (2008), had its US premiere at the 2009 South by Southwest Film Festival, and its European premiere at the Vienna International Film Festival (Viennale). Presently, Mike resides in Valencia California where he teaches filmmaking at College of the Canyons. In addition, he runs his own record label, Sound Virus Records, where he releases CDs and vinyl for undiscovered and emerging bands.

#### **Lead Actress Atsuko Okatsuka's Bio**

Atusko Okatsuka was born in Chiba, Japan and moved to America at the age of nine. She is fluent in English, Japanese and Mandarin Chinese. Atsuko is currently pursuing her studies in Psychology and hoping to transfer to CSUN next semester to receive her Bachelor's degree. Littlerock is her first feature film.

#### **Lead Actor Cory Zacharia's Bio**

Cory was born and raised just minutes away from Littlerock, California. Growing up on food stamps and welfare housing, Cory has always dreamed that acting or modeling would be his escape from the harsh realities of the desert. This is Cory's first feature film.

### **Supporting Actor Roberto Sanchez's Bio**

Roberto Sanchez was born in Havana, Cuba, on January 04, 1965. In 2002, he moved back to Miami and got his big break when he was cast as one of the leads in the blockbuster hit "2 Fast 2 Furious". In 2003, he relocated to Los Angeles to focus more on television and film. Since 2003, he has appeared in more than 50 projects. Some of his television credits include LIE TO ME, PRISON BREAK, WITHOUT A TRACE, GHOST WHISPERER, HEROES, COLD CASE, DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES, THE UNIT, NCIS, CRIMINAL MINDS, ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT.

### **Cast List**

Atsuko Okatsuka	Atsuko Sakamoto
Cory Zacharia	Cory Lawler
Rintaro Sawamoto	Rintaro Sakamoto
Brett L. Tinnes	Jordan Doniel
Roberto Sanchez	Francisco
Matthew Fling	Garbo
Ryan Dillon	Brody Butler
Markiss McFadden	Marques Wright
Sean Neff	Sean Tippy

## **Crew List**

Written & Directed By: Mike Ott

Story By: Mike Ott, Atsuko Okatsuka, Carl McLaughlin

Produced By: Fred Thornton, Laura Ragsdale & Sierra Leoni

Executive Producer: Hsin-Fang Li & Denny Densmore

Edited By: David Nordstrom

Original Music: The Cave Singers

Director of Photography: Carl McLaughlin

Sound Recordist: Fred Thornton

Sound Design: Ron Salaises

Re-recording Mixer: Mark Ettel

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## **Festival Screenings:**

San Francisco International Film Festival (USA April 2010)

Rhode Island International Film Festival (USA August 2010)

Reykjavik International Film Festival (Iceland Sept. 2010)

Warsaw International Film Festival (Poland Oct. 2010)

Viennale - Vienna International Film Festival (Austria Oct. 2010)

Starz Denver International Film Festival (USA Nov. 2010)

Cairo International Film Festival (Egypt Nov. 2010)

Torino International Film Festival (Italy Nov. 2010)

Thessaloniki International Film Festival (Greece Dec. 2010)

## **Reviews:**

### **The Examiner [Dennis Willis]**

<http://www.examiner.com/x-15568-SF-Film-Industry-Examiner~y2010m4d20-SFIFF-Review-Littlerock>

Charming indie drama finds traveling Japanese siblings Atsuko (Okatsuka) and Rintaro (Sawamoto) marooned in Little Rock on their

pilgrimage to Manzanar, California (where over 110,000 Japanese Americans were imprisoned during World War II).

They quickly bond with the locals at a motel party and because Rintaro speaks a little English (the girl Atsuko speaks none), he is able to navigate through a night of harmless beer-drinking. But when it comes time to leave, Atsuko decides to stay in the small town for a few more days.

Although she cannot speak English, she instinctively observes certain personalities that are crystal clear in any language: the sweet boy everyone thinks is gay, the bully he owes money to, the black racist, the confident guy who's pretty good at bedding anyone he meets, etc. And what's amazing about the simple narrative is that it doesn't matter that nobody can understand each other. The characters' language barriers never get in the way of what's really being said.

Writer-director Ott resisted the urge to use the East/West youth-culture clash to say something about rural Americana or to contrive some sort of analogous connection to the internment camps (it's there but it's for us to find). Instead, he allows Okatsuka (also a co-writer) her own experiences without the burden of commentary.

A late scene depicting one side of a telephone conversation is a tough, clever piece of filmmaking and says everything about how sometimes we can't connect to each other even when we're desperate to. (Small Form Films)

### **The Rumpus [Anisse Gross]**

<http://therumpus.net/2010/06/the-rumpus-review-of-littlerock/>

If films were fighters, Mike Ott's second offering, *Littlerock*, would weigh in at 123 minutes, placing it in the featherweight division, a deft, gentle movie, lithe and light during its two hours in the ring.

Not to suggest that it's diminutive — this indie sleeper is rich and moving and packs an emotional left hook.

*Littlerock* works like *Lost in Translation* in reverse. The slight plot: two young Japanese adults, brother Rintaro and sister Atsuko, have come to America on vacation, and their car breaks down in Littlerock. You're expecting Arkansas, but oh no, this is Littlerock, *California*, a quintessential nowhere town, where it takes a lot of work to escape. For most of the youth in the picture, that possibility seems more like a pipe dream. In the opening scene, as they're walking along a little highway, Rintaro asks his sister, "Is this the right place?" But the right place for what? And what can be gleaned from a place like Littlerock?

Littlerock isn't much more than some dusty streets lined with thirsty-looking trees, motels, and trailer homes. Ott captures the palette of the place with neutrals and vivid sunsets, generously painting what's probably a fairly ugly town as somewhat beautiful, and the film's quietude is accompanied perfectly by a soundtrack courtesy of The Cave Singers. As soon as the two siblings get the ride situation figured out, Rintaro (Rintaro Sawamoto) wants to continue on to San Francisco as they had planned, but after a chance motel party, Atsuko wants to stay behind for a while

and get to know (both intimately and casually) what this place is all about. So Rintaro continues on, and Atsuko stays behind to absorb America through one of its best lenses, the shithole nowhere town and the people who populate it. Because what are we if not our nowheres, our left-behind scraggly towns, replete with potheads and rusted-out bikes, loans to repay and girls worth fighting for?

Atsuko befriends Cory (Cory Zacharia), a bizarre, almost unclassifiable person: his sexual identity is very much in flux (bringing out the homophobia in the small-town drug dealer), he's as naive as he is cunning, generous yet totally self-absorbed, and his mercurial character dominates much of his screen time, such that he nearly steals every scene he graces. His character's charm is largely due to his total lack of self-awareness — he has a habit of inviting himself along on dates where he's clearly not welcome. But he's so likeable because you don't have much of a clue who he really is. And his magnetism is curiously astronomical. Because Atsuko can't decipher it any other way, she takes Cory at face value, based on his generosity: he gives her a place to stay and a job taking orders at a roadside burrito joint.



Atsuko (Atsuko Okaysuka) is one of the movie's writers, and she has oddly and endearingly written herself into the script, not as an agent of speech to move the narrative along, but rather as a quiet observer, one who is relegated to being a mirror for the actions and scenery around her. Because she can't understand a single word of English, she's left to deduce the characters of Littlerock through their actions. Additionally, there are no subtitles in the film (except when Rintaro and Atsuko are speaking to one another), so the viewer never knows what Atsuko is saying, which results in these beautiful exchanges during which we too have to take Atsuko at her blinks and nods and the way she stares intensely ahead. We have to deduce how she feels as she rides her bike through town and listens to the mixtape a local hipster gives her. We read her through the economy of her body language. It isn't hard— Atsuko Okaysuka is a natural on the screen, managing to captivate us for silent stretches of time without a single word. Her performance is reminiscent of Michelle Williams in *Wendy and Lucy*, high praise indeed.

It's worth mentioning that most of the characters in Ott's film aren't professional actors; for the most part they've been cast to play themselves. This choice might

in part be due to financial strains, but it lends the film its verité quality, and also reveals Ott's commitment to accurately representing this particular place and time.

And Ott has an affection for these characters that tends to rub off on you: those characters whose presence would normally be wearisome, ended up endearing themselves to me with their small-town eccentricities.

Atsuko ends up falling for the aforementioned local hipster, who's slightly cringe-worthy in his Scwhinn-bike-mix-tape-you-don't-speak-english seduction. Does she fall for him because of his hair? (He does have amazing hair, but that seems to be about it.) She thinks that her feelings for him are mutual, but how can she know? She sort of ends up knowing, when she catches a glimpse, through his curtains, of him making out with another partially undressed girl.

She leaves that scene without being able to confront him or express herself fully, and this is one of the moments that get at what this movie is really about. It's about how language alienates us, and all the spaces that separate our attempts at communication, barriers between what we want to say and what we actually say. Atsuko is brimming with things she's dying to express, but with very few outlets. Everyone's trying to tell someone else who they are, but no one gets around to

figuring out how to say it. In one scene, Cory, Atsuko, and the dishwasher, Francisco (Roberto Sanchez), are sitting outside the burrito joint where they work. It's late, likely after closing, and they're outside smoking. They're having a semblance of a conversation, but none of them actually speak a common language. What could be more 2010 California than that?

When Rintaro finally returns from San Francisco, he and Atsuko leave together for their last stop on the trip: Manzanar, the site of an old WWII Japanese internment camp where over 110,000 Japanese Americans were imprisoned during the war. The scene shows the brother and sister silently observing monuments and photos, absorbing the history of the place. This sequence feels very much like an homage to, or an echo of, a similar sequence in Barry Jenkins' film *Medicine for Melancholy*, in which the two characters, both African American, are looking at the works at MoAd (the Museum of the African Diaspora). As Rintaro and Atsuko take in the history of Manzanar, an internment camp in the middle of the California desert, you feel the experience of their alienation sidle up against a shared history. It's a scene in which the brother and sister are able to place their identities, the continuity of their cultural heritage and history, in a

world in which they are now outsiders. For a brief moment in the film, they are simultaneously both outsiders and at home.

*Littlerock* is understated without being underwhelming. It's a quiet, atmospheric whiff of a narrative, and acts like a lyric documentary of a place in time. And that place is Littlerock, which seems like nowhere you'd want to be from, or end up in, and yet people are from there and people end up there. It's a portrait of what happens in a place like that. As it turns out: a lot of pot smoking, hanging out, bike riding, rage, homophobia, and debt repayment.

While *Littlerock* isn't a film for everyone (if you thought watching *Wendy and Lucy* was like watching paint dry then don't bother) it's a quiet — deliberately quiet — sleeper from Mike Ott, who is gifted at restraint. It's also a quiet film because, well, why should a movie about the spaces in communication be loud? Nothing in the film feels forced, and his directorial hand is modest and tempered. Although he's in full control of the material, Ott manages to leave enough room for ambiguity — a sign that he's a director with a bright future ahead.

The movie closes with a pay phone scene that tears at your littlerock heart — Atsuko is leaving without notice to return to Japan; she calls Cory to say goodbye but of course she can't make herself understood over the phone. All he can understand are her sad inflections; ultimately he never knows what she's actually saying.

There is so much that we are unable to express through language, a space we fill with gestures of longing, looks, glances. It's a space that Mike Ott has opened a window onto, letting us observe people who are looking to be loved. Or, if that's too much to ask, then to be partially understood. And if *that's* too much to ask, then to just hang out for a while together, perhaps under an overpass, or in a trailer, or on a pair of bikes listening to mix tapes. Because in a town like Littlerock, maybe anything is enough.

### **Beyond Chron [Peter Wong]**

<http://www.beyondchron.org/news/index.php?itemid=8042>

Mike Ott's "Littlerock" provides a compelling portrait of life among slackers in small town America. But it's primarily a hypnotic tale of intercultural "communication" and America's penchant towards racist love and hate.

The title refers to the small Southern California town where Japanese tourists Rintaro and Atsuko are stranded in. The brother and sister's plans to leave Littlerock and move on to Manzanar hit a snag. Atsuko decides to temporarily stay in town. Being enchanted by the slackers, a couple of whom hit on her, influences the Japanese woman's decision.

Even though Atsuko doesn't speak a word of English, she and the viewer get an education of sorts in intercultural

communication. Ott raises in entertaining fashion the question of how much we understand of another person is based on empathy and how much on our own personal projection. The lack of English subtitles for Atsuko's dialogue for much of the film challenges the non-Japanese speaking viewer to look for clues providing hints to the young woman's true feelings. That task is eased somewhat by the viewer's lacking Cory's sexual obsession with Atsuko.

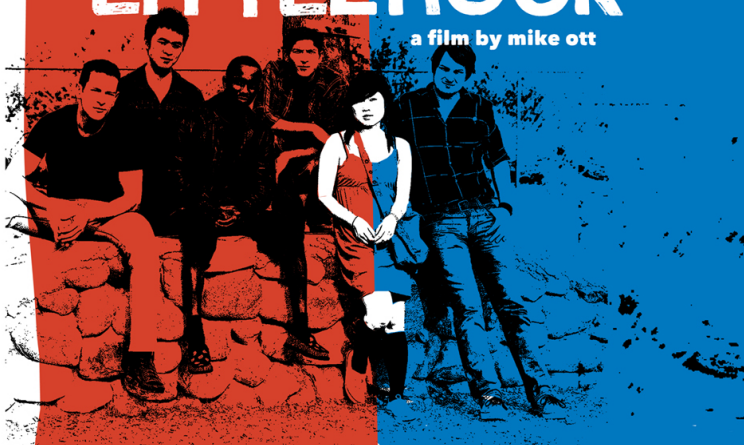
While the Japanese woman may not understand English or its subtleties, she's still capable of observing human behavior. Her bond with a Spanish-speaking taqueria cook gets forged despite lacking a lingua franca. On the other hand, it's not clear Atsuko realizes that the white slackers' fascination with her comes from her "exotic" presence in a majority white town.

To the Japanese woman's credit, she does eventually become wiser about Americans. Whether that wisdom flows the other way, the viewer will enjoy discovering the answer.

## **Poster Design**

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A SMALL FORM FILMS PRODUCTION

Featuring: ATSUKO OKATSUKA • CORY ZACHARIA • RINTARO SAWAMOTO • ROBERTO SANCHEZ • RYAN DILLON • BRETT L. TINNES • MARKISS McFADDEN • MATTHEW FLING  
Produced by FRED THORNTON & SIERRA LEONI • Edited by DAVID NORDSTROM • Executive Producer HSIN - FANG LI • Original Music by THE CAVE SINGERS  
Written by MIKE OTT • ATSUKO OKATSUKA • CARL BIRD MCLAUGHLIN • Directed by MIKE OTT

COLOR

