

## **SUMO EAST AND WEST**

### **SYNOPSIS**

"Sumo East and West" is a feature documentary about the cultural changes facing Japan as more and more foreigners enter the ancient Japanese sport of sumo wrestling. In Japan sumo is not only the national sport but a centuries-old cultural treasure. Yet this highly traditional world is facing profound changes due to the postwar influx of foreign images, ideas, and influences—foremost among them the arrival of bigger, heavier American wrestlers of Polynesian descent from Hawaii. At the same time, sumo is growing in popularity in the West, where its advocates are lobbying for its inclusion in the Olympics and staging amateur sumo tournaments in venues like Las Vegas casinos—events that bear little resemblance to the sport's Japanese forebear.

"Sumo East and West" takes us into this world through the story of Wayne Vierra of Hawaii, whose promising professional sumo career in Japan was cut short by injury, but who rebounded to become a champion in the burgeoning world of amateur sumo. The film also features the Hawaii-born superstars of pro sumo who were at the forefront of the controversial transformation of the sport: Konishiki, Jesse "Takamiyama" Kuhaulua, and Akebono (the first non-Japanese sumo wrestler to reach the exalted rank of yokozuna, or grand champion). Also featured in the film is Emmanuel Yarbrough of New Jersey, the 750 pound 1995 World Amateur Sumo Champion; and Judge Katsugo Miho of Hawaii, a lifelong sumo aficionado who negotiated the contracts for the Hawaii wrestlers who went to Japan.

Filmed in Super 16mm in Japan, Hawaii, Los Angeles, and Atlantic City, "Sumo East and West" was produced, directed, shot, and edited by Ferne Pearlstein, winner of the 2004 Sundance Documentary Cinematography Award for her work on "Imelda," and produced, written and edited by Robert Edwards, winner of a 2001 Nicholl Fellowship from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for his script "Land of the Blind," which is scheduled to begin production in January 2005 starring Ralph Fiennes.

"Sumo East and West" was funded by ITVS, Pacific Islanders in Communications (PIC), the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA), the Japan-United States Friendship Commission, and the Japan Foundation. The film had its World Premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York City in May, 2003, and has since screened at dozens of film festivals including the IFP/Los Angeles Film Festival, AFI's SilverDocs, Director's View Film Festival (where it won FIRST PRIZE), and for a crowd of 6000 people in Honolulu at Sunset on the Beach in association with the Hawaii International Film Festival.