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FILM FESTIVAL
PREVIEW:

Tony Rayns on
IN THE REALM
OF THE SENSES

Like most of Nagisa Oshima's movies, this is based on fact. In 1936 a young woman named Sada Abe was found wandering in the streets of Tokyo, apparently in a state of bliss, clutching a severed penis. It was discovered that her (married) lover Kichi had died in a sexual climax with her some days earlier, and that she had taken the genitals from his body as an assertion of their continuing passion for each other. As one of the first women in Japan to have her sexuality in any sense made public, Sada attracted considerable sympathy, and was finally sentenced to only six years' imprisonment. According to Oshima, the mention of her name is still synonymous with the breaking of sexual taboos in Japan.

IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES (AINO CORRIDA) reconstructs the relationship between Sada and Kichi, from its beginnings with Sada's arrival as a new employee at Kichi's inn, to its triumphant, convulsive end. Virtually all the film's action takes place within a "closed" world of eroticism: every scene either depicts or relates directly to sexual love. The lovers deliberately isolate themselves from their society, drawing outsiders (geishas, inn-staff) into their sexual games only to increase their own pleasure. Their mutual ecstasies are predicated on a steady increase in erotic intensity: they experiment with voyeurism, copulation in sites where they risk being discovered, sex with elderly partners, and mild sado-masochism. Eventually, they recognize that death is not only the necessary climax to their pleasure, but also an integral part of it. In

strictly Japanese terms, it's surprising that Sada and Kichi did not opt for the traditional *shinju* or double-suicide; what makes Sada remarkable is that she felt secure enough in her "absolute" possession of her lover to be ready to go on living herself, and it was clearly this that drew Oshima to her story.

None of Oshima's films looks or behaves much like any of the others, and IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES establishes yet another new tonality in his work. The *mise-en-scène* appears utterly straightforward: nearly everything is filmed in long, static medium-shots (a strategy that tends to vouchsafe the "reality" of the physical action represented) which have neither the formalized organization of shots in THE CEREMONY (GISHIKI), nor the quasi-documentary naturalism of much of BOY (SHONEN), nor the self-questioning artifice of DEATH BY HANGING (KOSHIKEI). At first, it is as if Oshima were endorsing his characters' rhapsodic isolation by enshrining it in a form that permits no other frame of reference. A vein of fatalism in the plotting reinforces this impression, giving the film the air of a self-fulfilling prophecy: Kichi's willing surrender to death is anticipated in two

earlier couplings in which he thinks his partner has died, and several prominent appearances of knives and razors prefigure the climactic act of castration.

In fact, of course, Oshima challenges this complacency as surely as he challenged the supposed naturalism of BOY. The obvious authenticity of the lovemaking is offset by the unreality of Sada's insatiable demands and Kichi's hypervirility. Elements of expressionism (notably, the lighting of the interiors) complement the sense of hyperbole and help lead the film into a metaphorical register, in which an overt "fantasy" scene like Sada's imagined murder of Kichi's wife can stand on equal terms with the "realistic" scenes that it interrupts. Two other interpolated fantasies, both associated with Sada and both featuring young children, mark startling departures from the film's dominant fictional world: one (placed during Sada's first night apart from Kichi) shows Sada playing with a naked boy and girl, and the other (placed immediately after Kichi's death) shows Sada, Kichi, and a little girl playing hide-and-seek in a huge, deserted stadium. Neither scene yields any straightforward psychological meaning,



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Above and above right: Tatsuya Fuji (left) and Eiko Matsuda (right) in IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES.

although both are rich in metaphorical suggestions; their main importance is evidently their status as *interpolations*, differentiated from the rest of the film by their limpid color, their sense of open space, and their emphasis on connotation over clear-cut denotation—all of which serve to generate semantic tensions within the film.

But Oshima's strongest challenge to any unilateral reading of the film comes in the closing moments, with the sudden appearance on the soundtrack of a narrator who describes Sada's later arrest and locates the film's action specifically in 1936. The mention of the date comes as a shock, not just because visual evidence alone could have placed the action in almost any year of the Meiji Restoration, but also because 1936 was a particu-

larly significant year in Japan's political history: the year that consolidated the growth of militarism, saw the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany, and marked the country's last serious attempt at a *coup d'état*. Locating the action of *IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES* in 1936 determines the meaning of a number of incidental details, from the fact that the children harassing a tramp in the opening scenes are clutching miniature national flags to the presence of a squad of armed troops who briefly block Kichi's view as he waits for Sada; but it also makes the total absence of socio-political ideas from the film very striking. As Oshima has already demonstrated often (in the closing shot of *DEATH BY HANGING*, for instance), absence can be as significant as presence.

However provocative such undercurrents may be—and it is clearly not accidental that Oshima should have made an ostensibly apolitical film at a time when Japanese political activists have lapsed into almost complete passivity—the film's primary force remains its exceptionally bold analysis of the implications of true sexual passion. French critics have repeatedly invoked the current in anti-Catholic thought that runs from de Sade to Georges Bataille to "explain" the film's psychosexual stance. Oshima, though, is interested in Sada and Kichi's sexuality precisely because it reflects the mainstream of the Japanese erotic tradition (as a look at any of the thirty-odd films by Koji Wakamatsu, who here worked as Oshima's production manager, bears witness). Much in the film—from the use of traditional music throughout to Sada's geisha trick of "laying" an egg from her vagina—evidences the acutely Japanese self-consciousness that makes Oshima's earlier work so troubled, and troubling.

IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES is not the first Japanese film to deal with Sada and Kichi—the magazine *Kinema Jumbo* cited Noburo Tanaka's *JITSUROKU ABE SADA (THE TRUE STORY OF SADA ABE)* as one of the ten best films of 1975—and it is not the first time that Oshima has foregrounded a sexual relationship in his work. On the other hand, it is the first film by a major Japanese director that could not be processed in Japanese laboratories, and cannot be exhibited in its own country without extensive cuts. Oshima says that he made the film because the offer of a Franco-Japanese co-production (with post-production facilities in France) allowed him to execute it with complete freedom; whatever else, the film is his polemical response to earlier battles with the Japanese censorship board. His audacity is fully matched by that of his excellent cast, especially the remarkable principals Eiko Matsuda and Tatsuya Fuji. ❀

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SUDS AND SYMPATHY by Roger Ebert

When I watch *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* with friends, I laugh. When I watch it alone, I don't. I watch it with a sort of musing introspection, playing the crises on the screen against my own notions of what the show is trying to say. After a season of watching it occasionally (I haven't become an addict), I think to myself that perhaps the show isn't intended to be funny. It is, of course, original and outrageous—my friends and I howled as the coach hit the soup—but it's not often funny in a comic sense. It uses the materials and appearance of comedy to create an atmosphere that's somber, fearsome, and scared.

When we laugh at an entertainment, the laughter's sometimes a form of buried communication. It can be simple, pure amusement, but sometimes it translates into astonishment that they got *that* on the screen. We had twenty-five years of television comedy playing *against* what could be shown or said. ("We took the list of no-nos and figured out how to get a laugh out of *not* putting them into the show."—Milton Berle.) Now we're two or three years into television comedies that exploit the new freedom of content.

That's often what we're laughing at during *Mary Hartman*: the fact that with an offensiveness now cheerful, now cruel, the program systematically explores every former television taboo. I'll bet they have a list somewhere. Offensiveness is fun; we were raised on it. The juvenile anarchism of *Mad* led through Stan Freberg and Bob and Ray to the painful fun of Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl, and now to the *National Lampoon*, NBC's *Saturday Night*, and *Mary Hartman*. Lenny Bruce wanted to shock; he anesthetized. We laugh at abortion, V.D., paralysis, miscarriage, adultery, stupidity, death, and the unspeakable indignity of drowning in a bowl of soup. The program itself is not intrinsically funny.

It's also very slow-paced, fascinatingly so. *Mary Hartman*, in particular, is a tribute to Bob and Ray's *Slow Talkers of America*. It takes her time to decide what she wants to say, and then another agonizing beat or two while she decides

if she should say it . . . *can* say it . . . dare admit it even to herself. She's one of the first series characters on television who lacks ordinary verbal facility (I exclude characters who deliberately stutter, are drunks, or do dialect). Most TV comedy characters get themselves into strange predicaments and talk themselves out—Lucy and Ethel have been doing that since the dawn of time—but Mary Hartman exists on the breathtaking edge of opening her mouth and talking herself into a breakdown.

Louise Lasser is so good at playing the title role that sometimes I'm not in sufficient courage to watch her. Television, so intimate, sometimes rewards the performer of small reactions and limited aggressiveness—they wear better than the emotional high-rollers. She'll last forever if she can get through the next thirty seconds. She isn't playing herself, but she's playing someone she has a direct emotional line to. I have the notion that, when she gets a new batch of scripts and reads them through to herself, she doesn't often smile.

She's surrounded by other characters who take their cues from her; she establishes a tone the program cannot lightly violate. Even Sergeant Foley, who came on so strong and smiling at first, seems in the early stages of psychic collapse; he couldn't last the first season without resigning from the force. Most of the other characters more or less conform to Mary's pace. Dramatically, they're walking knee-deep through water. Their double-takes are so protracted there's time for a commercial. The slow burns last from Friday until Monday. It's a style. Norman Lear must have known from the first what he wanted, must have supervised the scripts and directed the actors to get this slowed-down effect.



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