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THE BALLAD OF NARAYAMA

JAPANESE (1958). Title Translation. "NARAYAMA BUSHI."
A SHOCHIKU PRODUCTION. Released in the U.S. by
MGM AROUND THE WORLD. Producer: RYUZO OHTANI.
Direction and Screenplay: KEISUKE KINOSHITA; Based on a
story by SHICHIRO FUKAZAWA. Photography: HIRAYUKI
MURAKAMI. Ballad - "NAGAUTA" - Composed by ROKUZ-
EMON KINEYA; Ballad - "JORURI" - Composed by MAT-
SUO SUKE NOZAWA. Art Direction: KISAKU ITO. Editor:
HIRO SUGIHARA. Sound: HISAO OHNO. GrandScope. Fuji-
Film. Japanese dialogue, English subtitles. 98 Mins.

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|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Orin | KINUYO TANAKA |
| Tatsuhei | TEIJI TAKAHASHI |
| Tama-yan | YUKO MOCHIZUKI |
| Kesakichi | DANKO ICHIKAWA |
| Matsu-yan | KEIKO OGASAWARA |
| Mata-yan | SEIJI MIYAGUCHI |
| Son of Mata-yan | YUNOSUKE ITO |
| Teru-yan | KEN MITSUDA |

Synopsis

A tiny village in ancient Japan is so plagued by famine and starvation that it has become traditional for old people, once they have reached the age of seventy, to voluntarily ascend the heights of Mount Narayama and serenely await death to overtake them. Before making such a journey, an elderly matriarch named Orin sets her house in order by finding a new wife for her recently widowed son, Tatsuhei. Orin is pleased that the young man, Tama-yan, is both devoted and self-sacrificing, an ideal mother for Tatsuhei's three children. As the ceremonial feast preceding her sacrifice nears, Orin becomes embarrassed by her long white teeth, a constant reminder of the food she eats. Determined to look like a toothless old woman ready for death, she breaks them out on a mill stone. On the day of his mother's departure, Tatsuhei carries her on his back to the skeleton-covered, vulture-infested peaks of Narayama. As he races from the horrifying scene, snow begins to fall. Tama-yan joins her husband in thanking the gods of Narayama for allowing the old woman to die a quick death by freezing rather than a slow and arduous one by starvation.

Critique

THE N.Y. TIMES. "Viewing *Ballad of Narayama*, like tasting shark's fin soup for the first time, can be an exotic, if not a sobering experience. The Japanese drama deals with the relationship between food, hunger, the weak and the strong, life and death. It is stylized and occasionally graphic fare in the manner of the Kabuki Theatre, which is realistically staged, but decidedly strange

TANAKA and TAKAHASHI

to Western tastes... Keisuke Kinoshita is not a simple man, apparently, nor is his method of dealing with his drama rudimentary or particularly lucid. He has fashioned his tale in slowly unfolding vignettes that rarely are direct or to the point. Both the backgrounds and the color give the impression of artificial, not naturalistic, screen settings. And, while the constant twanging of the samisen and the singers' keening of the musical score are authentic period Japanese, they tend to distract a Western observer... As the matriarch, Kinuyo Tanaka makes a strong and resolute individual, whose like is easily recognizable. Her performance is as modern as the twentieth century. The other principals, however, behave in the tradition of formalized Japanese acting... They all make *Ballad of Narayama* an odd and colorful evocation of Japan's past that is only occasionally striking." A.H. Weiler (5/29/61).

THE N.Y. HERALD TRIBUNE. "An example of the Japanese style of soap opera... Keisuke Kinoshita is a man highly regarded in Japan, but although the reasons for this appreciation are apparent enough in this example of his work, technical skill cannot overcome sufficiently for my taste the uncommon misery to which the picture keeps doggedly. I am told that in Japan critics categorize films sometimes not by asterisks but by handkerchiefs, and in that vein I unhesitatingly proclaim this a five-handkerchief picture... Kinuyo Tanaka plays the tender matriarch with a charm that is as undeniable as her unrelenting misery is to Western eyes (and ears) unendurable... The scene [in which] she knocks out most of her uppers is as distasteful an example of painful dentistry as I hope ever to witness. I do not mean to deal lightly with the film. Kinoshita's skill is obvious in his gradual, almost insensible, change from formal stylism (extending even to obviously artificial, stagey sets) in the opening of his film to a naturalistic style meant to lead a Japanese audience familiar with the legend to an unexpectedly intimate contact with the reality of it. However, it was not enough to permit this perhaps hopelessly Western Westerner to enjoy the film as its original audience ought." Paul V. Beckley (6/20/61).