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DRUMMER views the Flicks

BONES IN THE SKY

Vengeance Is Mine, the first new film by Japanese director Shohei Imamura in a decade, manages to explore the personality of a psychotic killer and the breakdown of Japanese society in a fast, clean, almost effortless manner. The brilliance of Imamura's art lies in the complexity of this film — reaching as it does for multi-leveled conclusions with icy determination on all fronts. Based on a true incident, *Vengeance Is Mine* follows a series of Japanese films being seen in America (*In The Realm of The Senses*, *Empire of Passion*, etc.) that are both critical successes and popular with mainstream audiences. American audiences will respond to the talents of a well-versed director in this film, and miss the underlying social implications.

A little background: Japan is, for all intents and purposes, still an isolationist country. It has resisted, sometimes successfully, invasion, influence and dissent. All of its fronts have come under attack in some form or another, from creeping christianity, to foreign trade and influence, to invasion, to the devastating defeat of WW2. Each time, Japan has withdrawn into itself and reinstituted a national policy of order, culture, independence from the outside.

The biggest crunch has come in the last half-dozen decades, and currently, the biggest threat is the generation of almost completely Westernized Japanese exercising political muscle and defying the tradition order.

The Japanese see anti-social behavior like that of the killer Enokizu in this film, as a rare and almost uncomprehensible attitude. Things unacceptable are often blamed on an imaginary alien influence. And the outside influences have been broad — but typified as Western. Coupled with this particularly devastating aspect of non-Japanese behavior is religious beliefs. So, the director, to insure that Japanese audiences would have no difficulty with his intention, paints the villain, Enokizu, as follows: a rebellious son of a converted Christian Japanese fisherman who has been displaced by the Imperial Japanese Navy into the role of shopkeeper — itself lower on the social ladder than here in the West.

Enokizu embodies all that Japan sees as disrupting: a Western attitude about individuality, psychotic, Christian, a criminal, and a killer. This is entertainment as propaganda.

But, because it is based on a true incident, the character and the film are more palatable than one might assume from the heavy-handed polemic of the message.

When the film opens, we are almost at the end of the tale; Enokizu has been arrested and is beginning to confess. The

story of the last 83 days and incidents from the killer's childhood are mixed and reshuffled to fill out a character study that is mesmerizing and whole. The narrative line criss-crosses itself with slashing accuracy.

To reconstruct the life of Enokizu, we are told the following: As a child he watched his stern and powerful father subjugated to the will of the Emperor's Imperial Navy, his fishing boats conscripted, and his family displaced. When he tries to take his father's side, attacking the Navy officer with a fury perhaps only believable in a child — he is betrayed by his father, punished for his actions. We are told that this act, the betrayal, sets the course for the rest of his life. Western audiences might find the point a bit simplistic — but to a Japanese viewer, the betrayal ranks with the rest of the galaxy of untouchables: honor, pride, respect.

Enokizu becomes a rebel, a teenage outlaw (we are told). He defies his father and defies traditional Japanese convention. After WW2, when he is a young man, he becomes a translator for the military allies. Twice in the film the character slips an English phrase into his dialogue.

He rejects the arranged marriage partner, selects his own wife, a Buddhist, and forces her to convert to Christianity. He continues a life filled with petty crimes until he is arrested and convicted of fraud and sent to prison.

During his incarceration his wife leaves the family — taking her two children off to a spa resort where she works and lives. The father, already devastated by his son's actions, pleads with her to return — to reunite what is left of their shamed family. She does, but her motivation is a sexual desire for the father. It is an almost unspeakable yet completely understood aspect of intimate behavior. The father, caught in the throes of his Christianity, spends the rest of his life fighting his own desires.

When Enokizu is released from prison, he is westernized (with the attitude of the West represented by psychosis, rebellion and deception). He doesn't dress, act or think Japanese. He accuses his father of seducing his wife, and spurs family, wife and convention. His parting insult to them both is merely that he would have enjoyed watching them copulate.

Enokizu is, by this point, lost. He has no recourse but crime (Japan offers, as far as the director is concerned, no alternatives to the system). His rampage begins with the murder of a municipal worker and his companion in one of the most adventurous cinematic undertakings. He deceives, cheats, lies and slaugh-

ters his way into a box — the inescapable conclusion that his own self-destruction is his goal.

The new cinema from Japan is highly accessible to Western audiences. Since the *Realm of the Senses* trial in 1978, cinema and film expression has been opened up to themes and visuality heretofore denied. Ironically, this is a great part of the threat to Japanese attitude the country fears. And *Vengeance Is Mine* manages to illustrate that threat with a masterfulness that garnered it an award as Japan's best film in 1979 — yet widens the gap of alienation through its explicitness and the almost cult-heroism of its central figure.

Imamura's style is so clean and slick that American audiences will have a hard time seeing this as anything more than a sexually-explicit, action-packed crime drama. But the film, like the finest Japanese flower arrangement, is structured by much, much more than meets the untrained eye.

— John W. Rowberry