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FILM

The Big Heat

By J. Hoberman

THE SUN'S BURIAL. Directed by Nagisa Oshima. Written by Oshima and Toshiro Ishido. Produced by Shochiku. Released by New Yorker Films. At the Film Forum 2, January 2 through 8.

Nagisa Oshima's early films have gone into American distribution at precisely the right time. New wave in the *nouvelle vague* sense in 1960, they vibrate with punk stridency today. Last summer saw the belated theatrical premiere of Oshima's *Cruel Story of Youth*, a film of teenage passion run wild; this month, three more vintage Oshimas will be opening on Watts Street, starting with *Cruel Story's* follow-up, the iconically similar *Sun's Burial* (1960).

More violent, abstract, and fast-moving than its predecessor, *The Sun's Burial* was conceived by Oshima as a corrective to the earlier film, which was his first hit. Although an expression of political (and specifically anti-American) unrest, *Cruel Story of Youth* was identified with a current cycle of "sun tribe" films, glorifying misunderstood and delinquent youth. Oshima set out to bring the whole genre down; the very title of *The Sun's Burial* made his revisionist intentions clear.

Albeit considerably less romantic than *Cruel Story*, *The Sun's Burial* unfolds in a kindred netherworld of teenage punks. Tough girls wearing pointy brassieres vie for CinemaScope screen space with brooding pimps in stingy-brimmed hats and Hawaiian shirts. But where *Cruel Story* was populated mainly by dissolute students and dropout hoodlums, *The Sun's Burial* adds assorted lumpen scum and a right-wing crackpot to the stew. (Oshima shot much of the film on loca-

tion in Kamagasaki, Osaka's biggest slum—"a place," as Japanese critic Tadao Sato wrote, "where men bare their fangs and fight like wolves with their fellow beings.") Rape, beatings, and murder are commonplace; the film's ruling metaphor is a racket in which the hapless dockworkers sell their blood for extra cash. Driven out of Osaka's Times Square equivalent by a tougher operative, the young gangster Shin (Masahio Tsugawa) finds this blood business even more profitable than his stable of prostitutes. ("Clumsy slut—we can't afford another abortion!" he screams at one, flailing out with a handy crutch.)

The Sun's Burial isn't just lurid, it's positively sweaty—a film of palpable heat. The dominant colors are smoldering oranges and reds, and there's a insinuating corrida-flamenco score. Oshima's choice of music is impeccably incongruous—a cha-cha-cha in a seedy dance hall provides the sound bridge for a sequence of doleful lumpen marching on the blood clinic—but that's only part of his stylization. His bravura wide-screen compositions often locate the action at the edge of the frame, keeping the center a mocking zen absence. Every character has his or her trademark outfit. One punk wears the same retina-searing scarlet shirt in every one of his scenes—it's as much a part of his being as his face. The action is seasoned with bits of slum verité and Oshima's shots of the teeming Osaka waterfront make space-age Japan suddenly seem like timeless Asia.

Beneath the economic miracle of the '50s, *The Sun's Burial* suggested, Japan was less a society than a Darwinian jungle. It's as though Rainer Werner Fassbinder had made his corrosive, hallucinated *Lola* during the halcyon period that it depicts. Like *Lola*, too, *The Sun's Burial* has a flamboyant femme fatale. Takeshi (Isao Sasaki), a baby-faced dropout with a Sal Mineo pompadour, may be the film's nominal antihero, but it's the hardboiled teen queen Hanako (Kayoko Honoo) who's its strongest, most vital

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character. It is she who invents the blood scam, who betrays the Shin gang, and who, in a climactic barroom debate with the right-wing crazy, sets the stage for the film's appropriately apocalyptic ending, wherein the crazed lumpen burn their shantytown to the ground. (Moreover, with her lacquered ponytail, she could pass for the fourth Ronette.)

The Sun's Burial is as ruthless in its way as *Los Olvidados*; it's as hysterical as classic Sam Fuller and just as politically ambivalent. As Sato observes, Oshima doesn't just preach revolution but also "exhibits a romantic yearning for a situation in which human beings can express the violent side of their natures, exhaust it, and plunge suddenly into an abyss of annihilation." Unlike the faded print shown here during the Japan Society's 1983 Oshima retro, the newly released *Sun's Burial* blazes with gaudy glory. It's an appropriately flaming appetizer for Oshima's first masterpiece, the dark and tortuous *Night and Fog in Japan*, which follows it into the Film Forum on January 9. ■