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The Sun's Burial

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Oshima's New Wave Teen Angst

By LINDI KING

Coming as it does at this particular time, buried amidst the plethora of instantly forgettable summer movies, and with an angry summer sun preparing its assault, Nagisa Oshima's teenage classic *The Sun's Burial* is, as its name implies, a welcome respite, a cool tall drink of refreshing water under the shade of a comforting willow.

This does not mean that the film is anything but sizzling hot and sticky; *The Sun's Burial* is such an incredibly audacious homage to teenage angst and revolution, its punk style (even though it was made in 1960) so strident and pulsating, that the rerelease of a glossy new print makes it the most exciting film to emerge in the last several months.

Oshima, considered one of Japan's foremost film directors, is best known here for his highly erotic *In The Realm of the Senses* and *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (one of his weakest films, due perhaps to its being directed in English). His subject matter and style is clearly delineated from his Japanese predecessors (such as Ozu

and Kurasawa), who focused primarily on period pieces and historical settings. Oshima's 23 films, dealing often with student unrest and family instability, are a direct influence of the French New Wave, and his style is characterized by a quirky, jumpy camera style and a socially provocative narrative content.

The Sun's Burial, Oshima's third full length feature, is the exquisitely superior follow-up to his earlier *Cruel Story of Youth* and concerns the rivalry between two teenage street gangs, each populated by an assortment of seedy, disillusioned motley hoodlums. Festering in the ratty slums of Osaka, the kids earn money from robberies, prostitution or from a blood-selling scam, conducted in exceedingly unhygienic surroundings. Once a member of the street gang, the kids are entirely at the mercy of their gang leader who will just as soon shove a crutch into a young girl's throat for accidentally getting pregnant as stab a boy trying to run away.

Into this seamy underworld of unrelentless decadence tumble Yasu and Takeshi, two naive teenagers who are befriended by the cold, calculating

Hanako, a notorious *femme fatale*, who teaches them that "if it's useless don't say it"; alongside her in the slum are her family and a man known only as Agitator, who spouts political propaganda about restoring the Empire, but who all the while works the blood scam and steals census registrations to sell to aliens.

The utter despair of existence is visually overwhelming; the jerky hand held camera, the dirty towers and wire mesh surrounding the ghetto, the close-ups of bare feet trudging ankle-deep through litter tossed on the street, the interminable glare of neon, the obsession with sweaty, glistening close-up — sometimes cutting a person partially out of frame, focusing on the asymmetrical, unnatural arrangement of visual images, the single red article of clothing each main character wears as the slum reverberates from frenzied murders and suicides.

Oshima made *The Sun's Burial* in 1960 in response to the wave of teenage "suntribe" films glutting the Japanese market in the late '50s, films that chose to ignore rather than acknowledge the moral despair and defeatism of a

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discordant, disillusioned post-war Japan. Social discourse left out the future and attention was turned instead onto an excessive reglorification of the feudal past.

All of Oshima's films deal directly with alienation and total despair. Indeed his teenage angst films, outgrowths of *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Wild One*, operate from a decidedly different fundamental. American rebellion films always had a virginal woman still connected to

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society, and despite the inner torment elicited by James Dean and Marlon Brando, they had hearts as pure as gold and sensitive souls that were ultimately reachable. In Oshima's films, the kids are lost, totally severed from feelings and remorse. Their resensitization is negligible, their dilemma the result of an inoperable society. *The Sun's Burial*, by title alone, bespeaks Oshima's lack of any clear optimistic alternative, save revolution, which is suggested when Hanako screams at the Agitator to tell what the future will hold when his glorious Empire is restored.

"Will there still be gang leaders? Will there still be slums? Traps? Will there still be people like us?" As she speaks the camera pans to the drunken eyes glazed and unfocused, the gaping mouths, the toothless grins. Later when these same faces rebel and the slum is burned to the ground, Hanako and a young boy tell each other they have work to do and they walk hand in hand away from the ashes to the smog-filled city.

The Sun's Burial is playing at The York Theatre in San Francisco. ▼