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## CULTURE

# ***Ballad of Narayama* Has Life; Bresson's Latest Shows Style**



Sumiko Sakamoto meditates in the snow in the Cannes Film Festival-winning film *Ballad of Narayama*.

By **MICHAEL LAM**

Except for the courageous few who venture to the Pacific Film Archive frequently, Shohei Imamura is not an identifiable name. But hopefully *The Ballad of Narayama* will change all that.

The grand prize winner at the Cannes Film Festival last year, it has finally arrived in the Bay Area. Though it is arguably not the director's representative work, the audience could at least sample some elements that are quite uniquely Imamura's.

### **UNTHINKABLE**

Set in an unknown mountain village some 100 years ago, *The Ballad of Narayama* recounts a tradition that might appear unthinkable to our present-day civilization:

when a person reaches the age of

70, it is the duty of his or her eldest child to carry the parent off to a sacred place in the mountains to die.

It would be unfair to judge it cruel or inhuman. The village has a set of rules which, taken on their own terms, seem reasonable and workable:

Life is hard, and food is barely enough to feed the village. So when the life cycle takes too long to complete itself, man's assistance is needed to put everything in its rightful place.

And life is what *The Ballad of Narayama* is all about. And living. But definitely not lifestyle. When survival is the issue, lifestyle is merely a middle-class notion that bears no meaning. Besides, the class

system does not exist in the village.

Everyone is as poor as his neigh-

bor, and as hungry. Unwanted newborn babies are discarded without anyone raising any objection — unless, of course, the baby is thrown onto one's paddy.

And a wife is regarded as a helping hand. One character declares, "Anyone will do." Life is hard, but that does not bother them much. What is more important is that life must go on.

### **SUBPLOTS**

Imamura furnishes the film with many subplots, all of them insightful and many of them disturbing. Once an assistant to Ozu, the families he portrays here are the exact opposite of Ozu's family.

Sex, virtually undetectable in Ozu's films, is an activity one engages in whenever the need arises — usually in the spring, when snakes, birds and other animals harmoniously join in.

Curiously, despite the cruelty and the savageness, *The Ballad of Narayama* is a profoundly moving film. The last fifteen minutes, depicting the journey on the mountain, are mostly dialogueless. The effect is meditative.

When the snow starts to fall, just as in the beginning of the film, everything seems to be at peace. We have come to accept the fact that balance in life has to be maintained, in whatever form seems the most comfortable for those concerned.

*The Ballad of Narayama* is not a likable film, but it is thought-provoking, and it has a point to make. It is a grand and ambitious work, rich in texture and generous in perception.

It is playing at the Lumière.