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Hani's Film of Inferno Of First Love Arresting

By DONALD RICHIE

A boy and a girl, both of them just 17, meet and decide to make love. Since this is the first time for each, they agree to do as the grown-ups do—they take a room at a cheap hotel for an hour or two. They try, but he cannot. So they spend the rest of the time telling each other about themselves.

He was deserted by his mother when he was a little boy and taken in by a couple who had no children. She, from the country, came to the city to get a job and make her way in the world. Both of them have their troubles. He has a dull job, metal-worker, and the man he calls father takes a more than fatherly interest in him. She quit her job at the shoe factory, and began work as a nude model—though others look down on this profession, she finds it interesting but is very unsure about her future.

Obviously they need each other, but just as obviously they are unaware of this. After their several hours they go their separate ways into the big city. Shortly after this, on a Sunday, when he's playing with one of the neighborhood children, his attentions are misinterpreted. He is not jailed but is, instead, sent to a psychiatrist. One of her regular customers pays the girl to take part in a "show" which turns out to be an all-girl sado-masochistic entertainment, during which she is not particularly hurt but is very frightened.

The boy thinks about her, he cuts her name into his work-bench, alone in his room he plays with himself. She, eager, hopeful, lends herself to enormities which she doesn't even comprehend. Then, one day, they meet again. She is on a date but he tags along and they go to one of the local university festivals. There they see a very bad home-movie, made by a student, called "First Love"—but it is just because this film is so awkward, so inept, so sentimental, that the two finally realize who they are... they are in love.

This is the story of an extraordinary new film, "Hatsukoi no Jigokuhen" (which might be translated as "The Inferno of First Love") which opens May 25 at the Nichigeki, Shinjuku Bunka and Yokohama Sotetsu Bunka art theaters, as well as the Shibuya To-

picture since the earlier "Bad Boys" and "She and He."

Much freer, more spontaneous-appearing (beautifully photographed by young Yuji Okumura) than any of Hani's previous work, it cuts freely between past and present, unconcerned with the artificialities of motivation and characterization, attempting only to show in its purest form the theme—one which occurs in Hani's work as surely as it does in William Blake's—of innocence encountering experience.

He does this in an impressionistic manner, one scene added to another, the way that pointillist painters put one color beside another, the context determining the effect; each new brush-stroke, each new scene deepening the impression it is creating. Freed from the conventions of story, of novelistic characterization, one is able to appreciate subtleties, beauties, nuances rarely visible on the commercial screen. But, unlike an impressionistic painter, Hani is concerned with more than aesthetic effect. He is concerned with an ethical statement: he wants to show what happens to innocence.

He does so brilliantly: the completely disarming nude love scene which opens the film—done with such grace, such concern that there is no thought of prurience; the touching games the boy plays with the little child, their true nature spared him by his own complete lack of experience; the remarkable sequence where he gratifies himself, done with a respect, a dignity, a purity which gives our viewing of this private matter a decorum it could otherwise not have had; the touching, and right, scenes of the "private parts of little children; and a mysterious and extremely



Kuniko Ishii and Akio Takahashi, both just 17, are the young lovers of Susumu Hani's excellent new "Hatsukoi Jigokuhen," opening on May 25 at all art theaters.

moving flashback showing childhood games—all of this is innocence.

In apposition to this, we are shown what the world makes of it—particularly in the ferocious s/m show scenes (so extreme that they are being cut for the film's presentation at the Cannes festival this month.) Yet, Hani's point about experience is not that it is somehow bad and that innocence is somehow good (a simplistic trap into which another film about innocence "The Graduate" falls into and never gets out), but that innocence is real and experience is but a series of illusions. (In the context of the film, the lash marks are drawn with make-up, they rub right off; the voice that catch the boy's attention concerned with what they saw but what they thought—and hoped—they saw; the s/m show spectators have to consciously create their own emotion, have to believe that it is "real" when it is actually just a number of naked girls paid to fight each other.) Far from being good and/or bad, this is the way that the world is. Innocence must go because experience must come and the film shows this happening.

Or, actually, about to happen. Boy and girl agree to meet again at the same hotel and this time really show their love for each other. On the way there he is run over by a car and killed. She looks down from the hotel room at his body in the street. The camera looks at her—she is changed.

Even now I find the ending problematical. Was it necessary to kill him? Is there no way to retain purity but death; is there no way to suggest experience rather than have the loved one die

almost before your eyes? But, while I have these intellectual reservations, I note that while seeing the movie (I've seen it twice and will see it again several times) I felt none of an emotional nature but accepted the fortuitous death completely.

Perhaps that is because Hani chose to draw his parable as though it were a modern fairy-tale with a prince and a princess and dungeons and whips and an occasional ogre—with Tokyo's Ueno as the pure-land, and Tokyo's Shinjuku as the excitement-fraught never-never land which, as a matter of fact, it is. Seen in this context the death is right: Prince Charming expires at the first kiss, and the Sleeping Beauty wakes up to horror. This is admittedly romantic but then the romantic view is one of the few, in this age of frosted glass, that you can see anything out of.

Hani has said, of this film, that "we are now living between two worlds of morality, the traditional one which is crumbling, the new one which is burgeoning." Living between them we are "now afraid to leap into the depths of ourselves, content to see our outer image merely, as though in a mirror." In this film I wanted to look straightly, even fearlessly into this depth, into that part of a human being which is most personally his." He identifies this as the beings we once were, shows us this with two people (Akio Takashi and Kuniko Ishii, both amateurs, both utterly right, both lovingly directed), and by creating a film which is so adult, perverse, scandalous, shocking, that it allows us to catch these reflections of a world of purity and childlike innocence.