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PIX

Andrew Sarris & Tom Allen

Shohei Imamura's **VENGEANCE IS MINE** (1979), from a screenplay by Ataru Baba, with Ken Ogata, Rentaro Mikuni, and Mayumi Ogawa, is a hypnotically horrifying portrait of a psychopathic criminal named Iwao Enokizo. The great postwar master Imamura, who can blow as cold as Bergman and as hot as Bertolucci, is disconcertingly clear-eyed in following the graphic chronicle of Enokizo's progress as an extortionist and mass murderer, but the director also brackets the action within a richly historical and anthropological tapestry of his times. Enokizo grows into such a realistic depiction of the criminal impulse that *Vengeance* makes most every other film on the *In Cold Blood* theme look like child's play. Both the violence and sex are stark but uniquely subtle in the choreographed interplay as Imamura's vision shows itself capable of wedding the frequently contrary demands of modernist distancing and red-hot melodrama. At the end, Enokizo remains a cipher in the midst of a compelling mystery play, but viewers, like Imamura, will find themselves compelled to chip away at the veneer of a fascinating human puzzle. **Thursday, Bravo, 8 p.m. and 12:30 a.m** 9.286:Voice