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'Hanare Goze Orin'

Japan Times

By AUDIE BOCK

The cinema of the 1970s, like other arts and manners, turns back to older values — a neo-classicism and a new conservatism. Masahiro Shinoda has been pursuing his backward-turning course since well before the '70s, however, as one of the first Japanese directors becoming active in the 1960s to discover that the most startling novelty emerges from the oldest forms. Shinoda has been the only director of his generation to lavish praise on the "old master" directors Kenji Mizoguchi (d. 1956) and Yasujiro Ozu (d. 1963).

The first thing one notices about a Shinoda film is that he is one of a very few directors in Japan today who eschew Cinemascope in favor of the nearly square standard screen. In this way he revives the proportions of the newest art's formative years, and the effect is revolutionary.

But it is not only in the standard-screen format that Shinoda recalls his illustrious predecessors. Since he began independent production in 1967, his films have, to me, a striking similarity in content to those of Mizoguchi, often concentrating on the miserable fate of Japanese women. In more recent years, Shinoda's editing and camerawork have come to resemble Ozu's restrained style — action is kept to a minimum and each shot is beautifully and independently composed, so that the whole of the film appears to be made up of a succession of stills. To these classic qualities in his work Shinoda adds his own peculiar concern with the history of the Japanese consciousness, vengeance, the macabre, and the erotic.

"Hanare Goze Orin" (Banished Orin), Shinoda's latest reflection on the Japanese mind, treats his favorite themes with a new subtlety, avoiding the distasteful brutality he has in the past insisted on showing on the screen; and a new and more private poignancy. "Orin" commemorates the 10th anniversary of independent production for Shinoda's company Hyogensha. It returns to the work of the same author, Tsutomu Minakami, and the same craggy, blustery western Japanese sea-coast location. And it displays that exquisitely cold beauty Shinoda creates so well, this time with the aid of the cameraman who made Mizoguchi's "Ugetsu" (1953) and Ozu's "Floating Weeds" (1959) as well as Akira Kurosawa's "Rashomon" (1950): Kazuo Miyagawa.

"I find beautiful that which is in the process of being annihilated," says Shinoda, "and



Shima Iwashita (left), relieved at finding her "brother" (Yoshio Harada) in "Hanare Goze Orin," by Masahiro Shinoda.

as the blind shamisen player Orin meets her doom, so goes the primitive energy of pre-modern Japan." One of his finest portraits of destruction, "Hanare Goze Orin" is an excruciatingly beautiful film.

The lovely blind orphan girl Orin (played, as the female lead in Shinoda's films always is, by his wife, (Shima Iwashita) tells her story in a series of eerie flashbacks mixing the past, from 20 years earlier at the age of six, with the present, 1919. She is revealing her life's experiences to a male interlocutor beside the fire in an isolated hut in the winter. At first we see only his shoulder, but gradually we hear his voice, then see his face, and over the course of a year, finally the mysterious stranger (Yoshio Harada) becomes Orin's brother/lover.

Taken into a troupe of blind women shamisen players (goze) as a child, Orin remembers her strict training, by the troupe leader (Tomoko Naraka), her first menstruation — with a peculiarly tasteless bit of flower symbolism — and her expulsion from the troupe for having sexual relations with men. Her discovery of her own lust puts her entirely on her own in the world, but she manages to survive by continuing her shamisen-playing, traveling, and taking the money men give her.

But the mysterious man calling himself "Tsurukawa" changes her life. He refuses to sleep with her, and yet he travels with her. Taking on the role of brother, he also refuses to pimp for her. Here Shinoda inserts a blatant forecast for the benefit of the initiated; he pans down from Orin and Tsurukawa to the heads of a male and female puppet. Everyone who has seen Shinoda's 1969 "Double Suicide," an adaptation of a Bunraku puppet play, can go, "Aha! Fate!" but the device is

really a little too precious.

In any case, we now know that the two will die; it's just a question of how. By summer they are in business together selling geta, and Orin is happy for the first time in her life. But in August in a small town, Tsurukawa is dragged away for having refused to go through the local gangsters. Orin is left alone, and sets out again to find him. But on the way she is attacked in the woods by a man she knows, and she gives in. Her hidden companion "Tsurukawa" has seen all, and in jealousy his fate is sealed. He murders the rapist-tempter and sets out southward.

In winter they meet again, and become lovers for the first time, but eroticism inevitably brings doom in a Shinoda film. "Tsurukawa" is arrested not only for murder, but for desertion from the army, as in Shinoda's 1967 film "Clouds at Sunset" (Akanegumo). More symbolism as the flame from a modern blowtorch in the foreground blocks out police-army torture of the deserter in the background; the rise of militarism coincides with the modernization of Japan. Here lies Shinoda's socio-political statement, for "Tsurukawa" is not the solitary Tsurukawa at all, but has a poor mother, and was sold into the army in place of a rich son from his locality. Orin, who has found family in this "brother" and lover at last, returns to the gozen leader who banished her years before. But the severe old woman has died, and Orin, finding no family replacement, must return to her solitude. The film closes on a dry skull in the woods.

Shinoda must be chided for an overindulgence in symbolism in "Hanare Goze Orin," and one wishes he could have elicited a better performance from Yoshio Harada, who seems at a loss when sensitivity rather than brashness is required of him. But the surrealist, poetic touches of Keiji Hasebe's script, the elegance of Shima Iwashita's allure, and the perfection of Kazuo Miyagawa's four-season color camerawork compensate amply for the flaws in this work of new nostalgia.

Judging by "Hanare Goze Orin," Shinoda will have at least another decade of successful independent production, and hopefully his success will be an inspiration for many others. Showing at the Miyukiza (tel. 591-5357).