

Document Citation

Title	Ninja bugelijo
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1967 Jan 25
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Ninja bugei-cho (Band of Ninja), Oshima, Nagisa, 1967

Ninja Bugelijo

(A Band of Ninja)

(JAPAN)

Tokyo, Jan. 18.

Oshima Productions Presentation released by Art Theatre Guild, Tokyo. Directed by Nagisa Oshima. Drawings by Shirato Sampei. Music, Hikaru Haiyashi. With the voices of Keo Sato, Hideo Kanze, Fumio Watanabe, Shoichi Osawa. Previewed in Tokyo. Running Time, 135 MINS.

"Ninja Bugelijo" is the title of a popular comic strip by Shirato Sampei, about Japan's 13-century civil wars and the activities of the "Ninja," military spies adept at the arts of water-walking, invisibility, castle-scaling, etc. Originally intended for children, the strip has recently become very popular with local intellectuals who follow it in the same way (though with less reason) that their opposite numbers follow "Peanuts" and "Pogo."

This is the background for the latest film of Nagisa Oshima, the first of the Japan "New Wave" directors several years ago, who skidded to a kind of fame with sex-cum-gore pix of the caliber of "The Sun's Burial." His idea was to make a kind of comic-strip which would please everyone, but, like most of his pictures, this one falls between stools. It isn't camp enough to be in nor involving enough to be out.

The technique (or lack of it) in the film is perhaps the biggest problem. Since Oshima and his staff decided against animation, there is drawing after drawing held in front of the camera while a completely realistic soundtrack (starring some of the big names in Japan's legitimate theatre) is supposed to supply the visuals. That this can work is attested by pictures as different as Chris Marker's remarkable still-film "La Jetee" and the reconstructed version of Andrzej Munk's film, "Pasazerka." But then, these films used photographs of real people and this one uses drawings done in a most unsettling style: half traditional

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Japanese brush-and-ink, half early Betty Boop.

There is little hope for this film, even in Japan. Trimmed down, it might make some kind of short, though what kind is problematical since so much of the "action" emphasizes the most explicit black-and-white gore. As it is, asking an audience to sit through more than two hours of it is arrogance.

Chle.