

Document Citation

Title	Contact sports
Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	2000 Oct 03
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	227
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Gohatto (Taboo), Oshima, Nagisa, 1999

Samurai Boyfight; Bout a Girl; Beautiful Losers

CONTACT SPORTS

BY J. HOBERMAN

VV, 10/3/00, R. 227

TABOO

Written and directed by Nagisa Oshima
from the novellas *Maegami no Sozaburo* and
Sanjogawara Ranjin by Ryotaro Shiba
A New Yorker release

New York Film Festival, Alice Tully Hall
September 30 and October 2, opens October 6

GIRLFIGHT

Written and directed by Karyn Kusama
A Screen Gems release Opens September 29

TWO-LANE BLACKTOP

Directed by Monte Hellman
Written by Rudolph Wurlitzer
Film Forum September 29 through October 5

Taboo, which has its premiere at the New York Film Festival this weekend, could be considered an event within the event. Nagisa Oshima is Japan's greatest living filmmaker, and his first theatrical feature in 14 years is an action film at once baroque and austere, hypnotic and opaque—a samurai drama punctuated by thwacking kendo matches in which the romantic swordsmen keep falling in love . . . with each other.

Radically reconfiguring two novellas by Ryotaro Shiba, Japan's bestselling author of historical fiction, *Taboo* (previously billed as *Gohatto*) is an appropriately fatalistic, drolly deadpan, and elegantly precise restatement of the 68-year-old filmmaker's career-long concerns. From his aptly named *Cruel Story of Youth* (1960), through his New Left critique *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* (1969) and his hardcore masterpiece *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976), to the unreleased *Max, Mon Amour* (1986), in which Charlotte Rampling falls in love and carries on an affair with a chimpanzee, Oshima has reveled in the spectacle of unleashed sexual frustration disintegrating the dam of a repressive social order.

One of Oshima's few period films—his last samurai film, the blatantly subversive *Shiro Amakusa, the Christian Rebel*, was made in 1962—*Taboo* is set in 1865, just before the dawn of Japanese modernization, during the final two years of the Tokugawa shogunate and its samurai supporters. The movie opens with the commander of the Shinsengumi militia and his captain (Takeshi Kitano) selecting new recruits—possibly for their looks as much as their swordsmanship. The new men include the teenage cutie Kano (Ryuhei Matsuda) and the somewhat older, confidently strutting Tashiro (Tadanobu Asano). Scarcely have they been inducted than Tashiro begins hitting on Kano: "Have you ever killed a man? Have you ever made love?"

Like *Beau Travail*, to which it has a family resemblance, *Taboo* is set in an all-male military universe. But where the Claire Denis film is a rapt meditation on the erotic obsession that one officer develops for an individual soldier, *Taboo* is more detached and analytical in its concern with love's flowering within a highly restrictive system. The soon-to-be-obsolete samurai are governed by a strict code of conduct, serving a spy state populated by informants and characterized by the regulation of dress and decor. Under the regime of the samurai, homosexuality (repressed or otherwise) isn't the love



HAVING THAT LEANING: MATSUDA REBUFFS ASANO IN *TABOO*.

that dare not speak its name but, as in Oshima's last military drama—and *Taboo*'s main precursor—*Merry Christmas*, *Mr. Lawrence*, the only form of sexual passion that exists. In the end, all the principals seem to "have that leaning," as the captain is wont to say.

With his provocative bangs and rosebud lips, the enigmatic Kano is the universal object of desire—a pale, impassive vixen turning heads as he prances through the ranks. The coy lad is not only courted by Tashiro and several other samurais but obsessively observed by the captain, who, after he fights with both Kano and Tashiro, decides that they are lovers. Kano's otherworldly presence and Kitano's wryly contemporary performance, full of wheezy chuckles and bemused twitches, are but two of the subtly discordant elements Oshima throws into the mix. The film's narrative is annotated by both voiceover and intertitles; the action is set to Ryuichi Sakamoto's moody piano loop; the samurais are so fashionably attired they might have been outfitted by *Commes des Garçons*. (Indeed, their dojo's decor anticipates that ostentatiously underfilled Chelsea emporium.)

Oshima began his career by rebelling against the classicism of Yasujiro Ozu: "I tried to eliminate completely all scenes with characters sitting on tatami while talking." Breaking the filmmaker's own taboo, *Taboo* favors a discreetly classical *mise-en-scène*—balanced geometric forms, slightly off-center compositions, a lacquered look, a burnished but muted gray-brown-black-white palette. (The produc-

tion design is by the venerable Yoshinobu Nishiooka, responsible for such period classics as *Gate of Hell*.) There are numerous ghostly moonlit scenes but, as befits a filmmaker who programmatically banned "green" from his first color film, only a single daytime exterior.

Oshima is a visual thinker, and his studio world of painted sunsets is humanized as a thicket of rumor, innuendo, and jealousy. Someone starts attacking Kano's real and imagined lovers—including the sergeant who has been ordered to set Kano straight and take him out whoring. (The expedition to nighttown is the movie's comic set piece.) In the end, the leadership decides to resolve the Kano question by having him fight Tashiro to the death—a clash by night in a suitably mist-shrouded kabuki-land.

Oshima's films are typically predicated on a mixture of violence and restraint. (This is most apparent in his ambivalent attitude toward militarism.) If, as is sometimes said, he is a Marxist, it is of the Reichian persuasion—the economy that fascinates him is libidinal. Thus, the seductive Kano may be "evil," but not for the reasons that the smitten captain imagines. In an offhand and uncommented-upon aside near the end of the film, the boy admits that he became a samurai so that he would be free to kill.