

Document Citation

Title	Rockers
Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1983 Sep 06
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	48
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence, Oshima, Nagisa, 1983

FILM

Rockers

By J. Hoberman

MERRY CHRISTMAS MR. LAWRENCE

Directed by Nagisa Oshima. Written by Oshima and Paul Mayersberg from the novel, *The Seed and the Sower*, by Laurens van der Post. Produced by Jeremy Thomas. Released by Universal. At the Baronet and the Bay Cinema.

DON'T LOOK BACK

A film by D.A. Pennebaker. Directed by Albert Grossman, John Court, and Leacock-Pennebaker. Released by Landmark Films. Opens September 2 at the Embassy 72nd Street Twin.

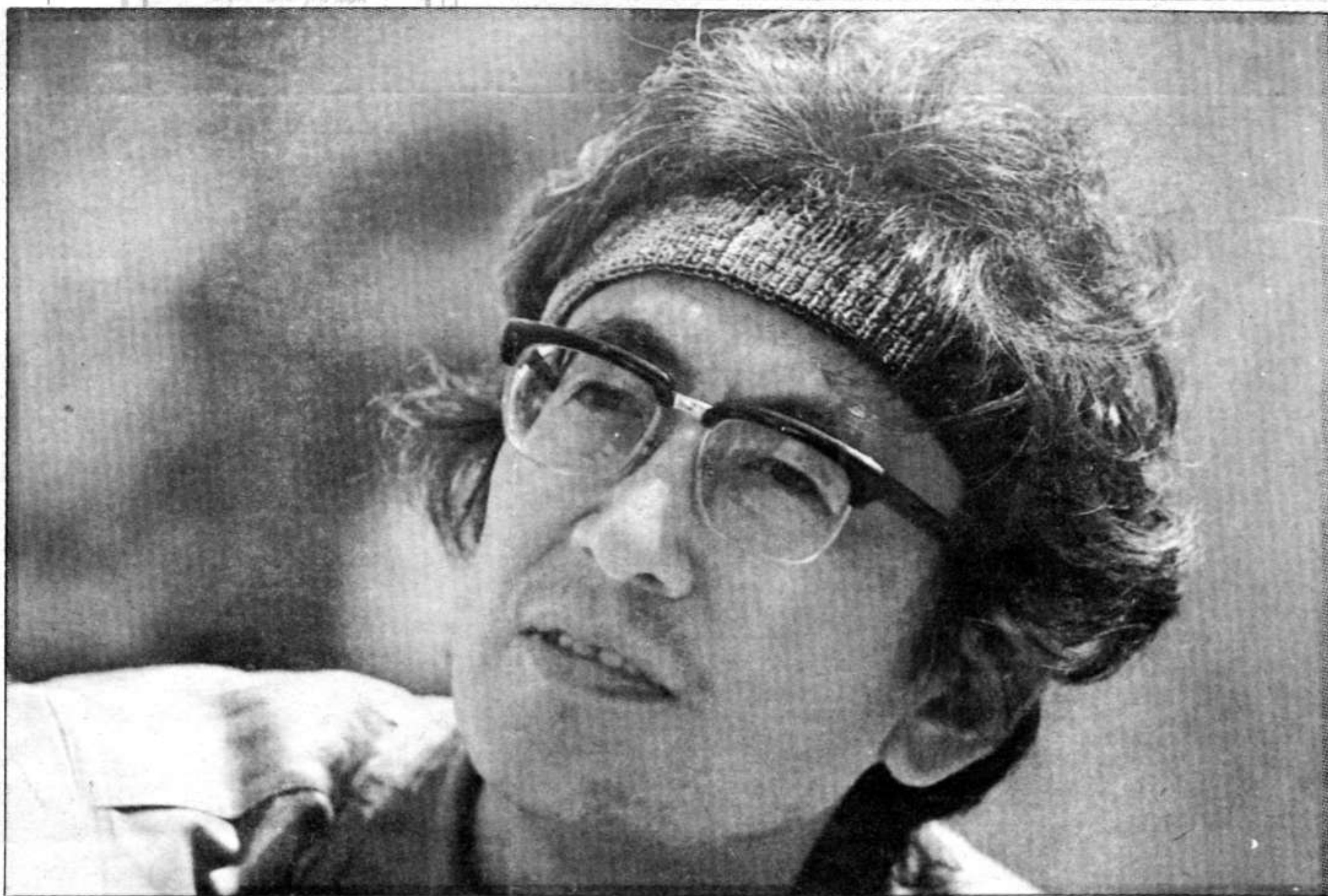
Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* is nearly as startling as his *In the Realm of the Senses* but, David Bowie notwithstanding, it's a far tougher sell. Set in a torture-and-hara-kiri-ridden World War II POW camp, this international co-production explores the free-floating, samurai-stern sexual attraction between Japanese jailers and their British captives. "Oshima's life and career have always been marked by an ambivalent attitude toward the military," writes Japanese critic Tadao Sato in the cover story of the current *American Film*. Still, the eccentric, uneven *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* is scarcely closer to *The Grand Illusion* than it is to *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.

In Japan, the film is called *Senjo No Merry Christmas*, literally "Merry Christmas on the Battlefield," a title more in keeping with the atmosphere of subtle delirium. Bowie plays an indomitable, if wispy, New Zealand major. His admiring nemesis—the Shakespeare-quoting, kendo-practicing commandant of a Java prison camp—is fellow rock star Ryuichi Sakamoto ("the keyboard wizard and major musical force in Yellow Magic Orchestra, Japan's premiere pop music export" according to the press book, as well as the composer of *Merry Christmas's* sparse, effective score).

Bowie's colleagues call him a "soldier's soldier." Be that as it may, he is surely a movie star's movie star. Despite the fact that his character hardly seems credible, this is his best screen role since *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. In the absence of even a single woman, the androgynous Bowie easily becomes the film's sole object of desire. The fanatical Sakamoto—whom Oshima identifies with the young army officers whose premature military extremism led them to attempt a coup against the Japanese government in 1936—falls for Bowie too, smitten by his captive during the latter's military trial.

Although this passion is tortuously sublimated, the two make a sensational couple. Bowie's hair is dyed a dazzling shade of platinum while Sakamoto's stylized eye makeup makes it seem as though he's sucking in his temples the way a model does her cheeks. Their dance of death is counterpointed by the more, but only slightly more, prosaic relationship between the Japanese-speaking intellectual, Colonel John Lawrence (Tom Conti) and the jovially sadistic Sergeant Hara (a stand-up comedian known professionally as Takeshi), whose unforgettable one-liner gives the film its English title.

Merry Christmas reverberates with the sound of clashing culture's: it's a great Sam Fuller plot, particularly given Fuller's oft declared contempt for the hypocritical rules of war. Against an idyllic background of shimmering emerald and aquamarine, the denizens of the world's preeminent tight little islands (each with an elaborate tea ceremony all its own) attempt to comprehend each other's mystifying code of honor, with inadvertent parody a frequent result. "You haven't seen a Japanese until you have seen hara-kiri," Sergeant Hara taunts Colonel Lawrence. "Stop it," the Englishman responds when presented with the spectacle of imminent disem-



"You haven't seen a Japanese until you've seen hara-kiri," says one of Nagisa Oshima's characters.

bowelment. "For God's sake, man, stop it!" "Why are you still alive?" Hara then asks the Colonel. "I'd admire you more if you killed yourself."

The enigma of hara-kiri is central to the entire film. In the very first scene, Hara informs Lawrence that "a disgraceful incident has occurred," namely, one of the camp's Korean guards has attempted to bugger a Dutch POW. Later, the Korean is given the privilege of committing hara-kiri, a tricky ritual he understandably botches. "Raise your head, raise your head," the form-conscious Hara shrieks as the hapless guard begins to stare at the knife in his abdomen. Then Hara loses his patience and lops the offending head off. Appalled by this travesty, Sakamoto decides to raise the camp's spiritual level by making everyone—Western and Japanese alike—take a 48-hour fast.

Nutty as it is, three-quarters of the way through the film, *Merry Christmas* begins to drag. At this point Oshima throws in an ill-advised flashback, rendered additionally painful by the ghostly singing of the child actor who plays Bowie's younger brother. Perhaps Oshima felt the need to explain Bowie's subsequent heroism, perhaps the producer felt it wise to allow the star some additional screen time. Whatever the reason, it's a real miscalculation. Bowie, in this film at least, is one sphinx who doesn't need a secret.

By the time *Merry Christmas* rallies for a series of brilliant scenes—including Hara's drunken impersonation of Santa Claus, Sakamoto's freak-out, and Bowie's martyrdom—the essential rhythm has been lost. There's even a less than convincing coda tacked on as well. Still, the epilogue does allow Hara to reprise the title line—a moment of cross-cultural transcendence that deserves to inspire as many film buff imitations as the scene in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* where Alfonso Bedoya informs the befuddled Humphrey Bogart, "Badges? We don't need no stinking badges!" A mere "merry Christmas" will never sound the same.