Document Citation

Title	**Back pages: before A.T.G.: Oshima Nagisa**
Author(s)	Tony Rayns
Source	*Publisher name not available*
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	12-13
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Oshima, Nagisa (1932-2013), Kyoto, Japan
Film Subjects	

BACK PAGES: BEFORE A.T.G.

Oshima Nagisa

Nowadays it is quite usual for a director to spend three years between films. Not so long ago, however, it was exceptional. I left the Shochiku company at the start of the 1960s because it had withdrawn my film *Night and Fog in Japan* from distribution. I quickly went on to make the films *The Catch* and *The Rebel Amakusa Shiro*, but after that there was a three-year gap before my next feature. As soon as I left Shochiku I set up an independent company called Sozo-sha (Creation Company) with some friends. The company stayed busy enough with productions for the TV companies, but there was no opportunity for feature productions within sight. That was the most difficult period for independent production in the entire history of Japanese cinema. The industry as a whole had gone into decline, and the major companies saw no solution but to cut back levels

Oshima at Shochiku: **Cruel Stories of Youth**

of production. In these circumstances, there was no space for independents. Some of my friends left Sozo-sha not long after joining. It was extremely frustrating to be in the position of wanting to make a feature and seeing absolutely no possibility of doing so.

Oshima at Shochiku: **The Sun's Burial**

At one point during those difficult years, I went to South Korea to make a TV documentary. This was before the Japanese-Korean rapprochement, and there were only about ten Japanese in Seoul. Those were very hard times for Korea, which still had not recovered from the wounds of the Korean War. It was as if there had been a huge fire, and people were living in the gutted embers and ruins: there was a vast black market. Premier Lee's government had been overthrown after the student uprising in April 1960; Park had come to power in a military coup a year later. I went there in the autumn of 1964. By that time, the newspapers were already agitating for greater freedom of speech. The Japanese newspapermen stationed in Seoul used to buy cheap bottles of Johnny Walker at the P-X store (which was off-limits to Koreans) to help their Korean journalist friends to drown their sorrows. I met a number of Koreans through the Japanese journalists, and we'd sit drinking Jinro Soju wine every evening. We regularly got plastered.

"Boiled red peppers grow hotter!
Beaten wheat throws up new shoots!"

I stayed in this Korea for two months. For a long period at the start, before permission for me to film came through, I spent every day just wandering around Seoul. I had an E.E. camera with me, borrowed from Kawamata Noboru, but I wasn't taking pictures. I was following Tomatsu Shomei's advice: "Don't take any pictures until you know your subject". As my initial curiosity wore off, I found myself most struck by the figures of the children on the city streets. Once I'd reached this point, I started taking photos with the E.E. camera: pictures of the children selling papers and sweets to passing motorists. This may have had something to do with the fact that I had just become a father for the first time. But I had no particular plan in mind when I took the photos, no intention of using them.

The book *Yunbogi's Diary* — the diary of a 10-year-old Korean boy — was published in Japan in the summer of 1965. I wanted to film it as soon as I read it, but there was no possibility of

Oshima Independent: **Yunbogi's Diary**

shooting in Korea. Then it hit me that I could use the photos I'd taken of Korean children; if I were to combine them with the words from the book, I'd have a film.

I made *Yunbogi's Diary* with the help of some friends as a 16mm film. It ran just over 30 minutes. I thought it would be enough to organise just one preview screening of such a modest film, but when people praised it I began to have greater ambitions for it. I went to see Mr Kuzui, the manager of the Shinjuku Art Theatre (Shinjuku Bunka). He'd been having a success with late-evening theatre performances in the cinema; when the last house came out, around 9.30 p.m., he turned the place into a theatre. I asked Mr Kuzui if he would be willing to give a run to *Yunbogi's Diary* in this same late-evening slot. He agreed, but only on condition that I gave an "elegant" lecture to accompany the screening every night. The thought of having to lecture every night was rather daunting, but I went along with his request. We decided to put my first feature *A Town of Love and Hope* in the programme too, and the showings went ahead from 11 to 18 December 1965.

I strongly believe that films have no direct political power. None the less, these screenings were my gestures of protest against the ratification of the Japan-South Korea Treaty. As I gave my lectures, I had in mind the student protests against the Treaty, from earlier in the year, when government buildings and officers were pelted with stones. I remembered a cousin of my wife's, a beautiful girl who had just started at university: her pockets got worn through from carrying stones, and she used to poke her fingers out through the holes. She took part in the demonstrations regularly. Now, when I reflect on the lamentable destiny of the Japanese Student Movement and remember the ideals it began with, I feel choked with sorrow.

I spent much of the following year making *Band of Ninja*, in much the same way that I'd made *Yunbogi's Diary*: still images plus a montage of sounds. I took the techniques further in *Ninja*. It was released on 15 February 1967, on the Art Theatre Guild circuit. It played in a double-bill with *Night and Fog in Japan* at the Shinjuku Art Theatre and set a new house record. It led Mr Kuzui to organise a retrospective of my films in his late-evening slot, starting from 3 March.

It was experimental ventures like these that paved the way for the Art Theatre Guild's ventures into production, or rather co-production with independent companies. The first such venture was ATG's investment in and distribution of Imamura Shohei's *A Man Vanishes (Ningen Johatsu)* in 1967. Their first official co-production was my own film *Death By Hanging*, which began shooting in November 1967. It was a brilliant initiative. It gave the film-makers low budgets (perhaps 10 million yen) but also complete freedom — two factors which had never previously come together. My colleagues at Sozo-sha and I began working in a state that was equal parts tension and excitement. In this state, we didn't feel in any way restricted by the smallness of the budget; on the contrary, we found ourselves in a heaven of creative freedom. But, of course, there was always the risk of losing that momentum and finding ourselves instead in hell. When we started, there was no way of knowing how the project would turn out. But then, that's the way things must be for artists. The audience can judge the splendours and miseries of working in the conditions that A.T.G. made possible from the films themselves.

— First published in the book *A Catalogue of A.T.G. Films (ATG Eiga no Zenbo)*, 2nd edition 1980. Translated by Suga Shinko and Tony Rayns.

Oshima at Edinburgh, 1983