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Paintings at the Gateway:
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Hiroshi Inagaki's

Chushingura

"A scenic feast. The most tastefully, subtly designed Japanese film since the memorable GATE OF HELL."—Bosley Crowther, N.Y. TIMES

"An exquisite, breathtakingly beautiful work of art. For once, the quality is there in a manner that justifies the quantity . . . A must."—Judith Crist, N.Y. WORLD-JOURNAL-TRIBUNE

"Painstakingly designed to ravish the eyes, CHUSHINGURA is the finest movie spectacle I have ever seen. The film is performed in a mannered and polished style that maintains an edge of elegance in the sprawl of plot. CHUSHINGURA is pageantry and dance, ceremony and tourney; it is never happenstance. It is the only picture of this sort that I have ever sat through in willing captivity or could contemplate seeing again . . ."

—Robert Hatch, THE NATION

CHUSHINGURA (47 RONIN) — Japan's national epic — has been staged regularly for nearly three centuries. This screen version — three and a half hours in length, photographed in the most ravishing color since GATE OF HELL — is a work of such overwhelming magnitude that there is not the slightest risk in calling it the greatest of all Japanese films. (It is far from certain that there has even been a film to compare with it.)

Although — as a spectacle — CHUSHINGURA is in a class by itself, visual splendor was not the director's primary aim, but a by-product in a titanic drama, Shakespearean in intensity and sweep.

The actual events took place between the years 1701 and 1703. The Japanese know the story by heart; it is their version of the CHANSON DE ROLAND and the Arthurian legends, except that this chivalric tradition has roots in their own lives; more than any other, it expresses the concepts of loyalty, honor and justice that are the key to Japan's culture.

The villain of CHUSHINGURA, Lord Kira — cowardly, greedy, sensual — expresses himself with classic directness: "A man who ceases to lust after money and women might as well be dead!" and later, as his wife listens with ill-concealed contempt: "People say that it is shameful to be a coward. But I am proud to be a coward! I want to live for a hundred years!" Takashi Shimura, a samurai of his clan, sits ashen-faced as the corrupt old man expresses his contempt for the samurai and their code. Reminded by Shimura that he is addressing a samurai, Kira mumbles: "Yes, but there are many kinds of samurai!" In the end, asked to commit harakiri, he cries: "Why must I die? I don't want to die!"

Against this brilliant symbol of a corrupt regime stands Lord Asano—too honorable to offer Kira the bribe that means worldly success for himself and his house — and the loyal vassals who vow to avenge his martyrdom, knowing that — whatever the outcome — their lives are forfeit.

CHUSHINGURA recounts their story with a majesty unparalleled in films. Goaded beyond endurance, Lord Asano commits the unforgivable: drawing his sword in the Shogun's palace, he wounds Lord Kira. The act dishonors his house and makes outcasts (ronin) of his vassals.

Forbidden to defend himself, ordered to commit harakiri, Lord Asano walks through falling cherry blossoms that symbolize the heartbreaking beauty and transience of life. As he slowly unwinds his robes, Inagaki cuts to his corrupt enemy, starting out of a nightmare, screaming: "I am afraid! I am afraid!"

In the next scenes the camera races over the landscape: messengers to Asano's domain bearing the news of his death are relayed in palanquins on the backs of rhythmically shouting runners. Dynamic beyond belief, the sequence symbolizes perfectly the shocked reaction to his martyrdom.

Of the 47 ronin, Hiroshi Inagaki develops a mere half dozen so roundly as to suggest the spirit that informs them all. Gathering in Lord Asano's castle, 300 loyal vassals vow to avenge their lord. Oishi, their leader, surrenders the castle without a struggle; expecting Kira's spies to probe his motives, he pretends indifference to Lord Asano's fate and embarks on a life of debauchery. (Koshiro Matsumoto, the great actor who plays the role, subtly communicates the nausea he feels at the pretense.) Finally, he divorces his wife to spare her and his children the Shogun's wrath. On the eve of vengeance — mistrusting a handmaiden in Lady Asano's employ — he maintains the pretense even to her; and — knowing he will not live to see her again — reaps her contempt.

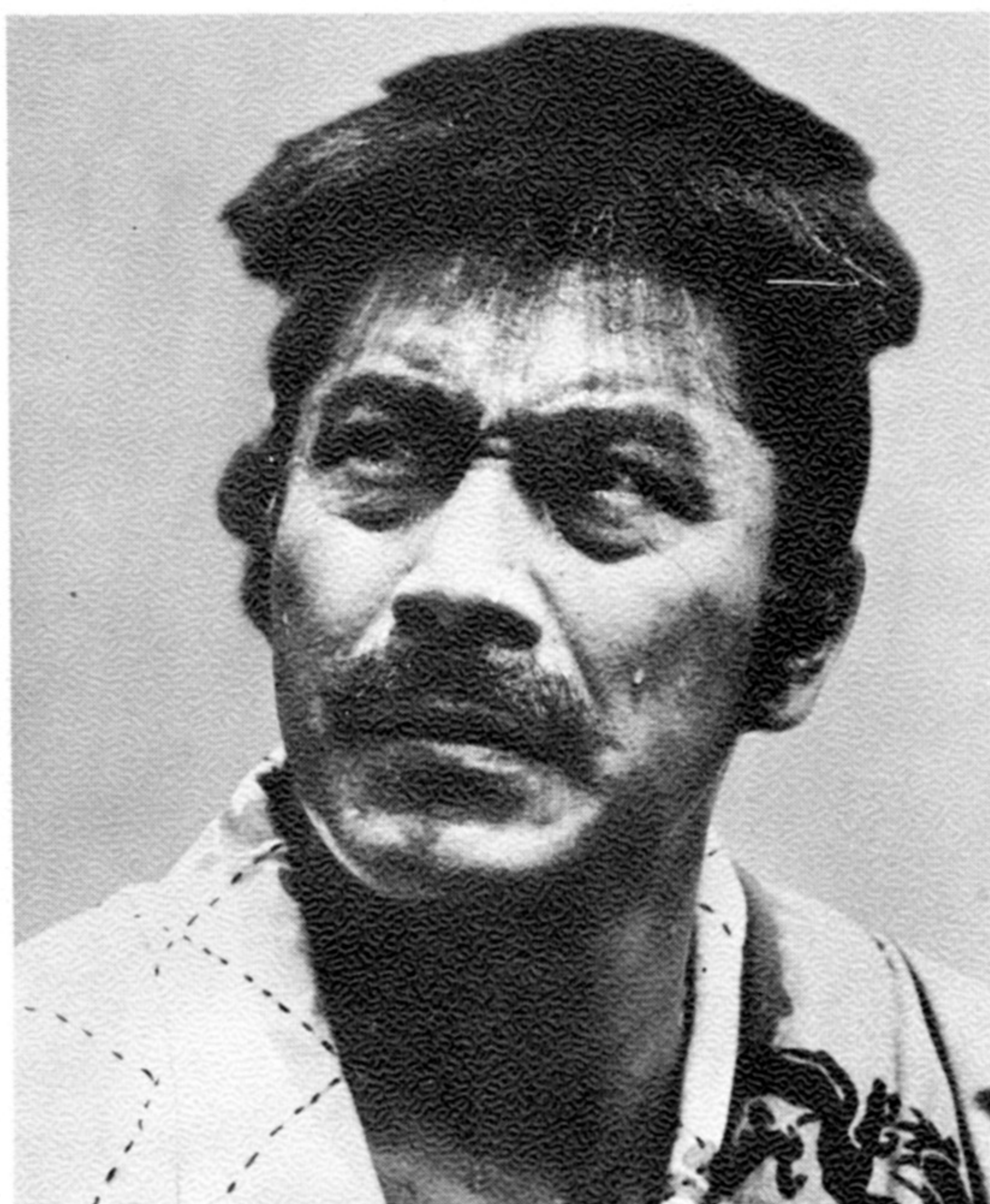
CHUSHINGURA mingles exultation with a dreadful sadness, for precisely those most worthy of life sacrifice themselves for the good of future generations. Yet this profound, subtle film never descends to a mere catalogue of heroic ideals and deeds. The world we know is always present: there is treachery, weakness, despair; in the course of a year, over half the conspirators defect; others back out at the last moment; one samurai — whose mistress threatens to expose the plot — takes her life and then his own; a loyal retainer, too ill to participate, dies crawling to the rendezvous; only 47 gather on the night of vengeance. In short, under its stylized Kabuki costumes, the world of CHUSHINGURA is our own: its relevance to the problems and perplexities of our era is unmistakable.

Hiroshi Inagaki directs with unbelievable control some of the most complex sequences in film history. Time and again, his shots are absolutely, inevitably, "right." Camera positioning, camera movement in relation to movement within the frame, invariably situates the viewer at the point of maximum expressiveness. His pacing is equally sublime: the rising action alternates discreetly with passages of lyric contemplation until it closes in the most completely satisfying denouement on film. The finale is a choreographic triumph: dozens of individual combats are luminously clear; one never wonders who is fighting whom.

Ennobling, exalting, incredibly exciting, ravishingly beautiful, CHUSHINGURA is on a plane with the Parthenon, the Taj Mahal, THE ST. MATTHEW PASSION as one of the supreme expressions of the human spirit. Among films it is unique: there is little likelihood that it will ever be equalled.

Those who participated in the production gave their all. It is impossible to honor them adequately, but we should like to list the major credits: Yuzo Kayama plays Lord Asano; Chusha Ichikawa, Lord Kira; Koshiro Matsumoto, Chamberlain Oishi; Yoko Tsukasa, Lady Asano; and Toshiro Mifune, Japan's leading actor, plays the role of Tawaraboshi Gemba, a great masterless samurai in search of a cause. Toshio Yasumi wrote the luminous screenplay; the photography — whose splendor leaves one speechless — is the work of Kazuo Yamada; Akira Ifukube's music is used with infinite subtlety to clarify the action; and for three and a half hours Inagaki's direction keeps you on the edge of your seat. When it ends, CHUSHINGURA seems too short; and viewing after viewing reveals new wonders.

Those who see it will find their faith in the cinema's promise restored. CHUSHINGURA redeems the medium; it makes up for all the shoddy movies ever produced.



CHUSHINGURA AND HAMLET

By the time this program reaches you, CHUSHINGURA — shattering the attendance records established during its amazing Berkeley run — will be in the 3rd month of its Gateway Cinema engagement. It's been years since we've seen so many familiar faces; most of those who saw it in Berkeley seem to be returning to see it at the Gateway!

This is a phenomenon unprecedented in movie annals; Japanese films — let alone one 3½ hours in length — have not been in vogue in years. What is there about it that keeps packing them in?

To us, the answer seems simple enough; CHUSHINGURA is not just Japanese, but universal. The concept of collective guilt, central to the film, is not peculiar to Japan, but dear to the heart of tyranny — as witness its recent application by the Nazis. In early 18th Century Japan a corrupt regime had imposed this doctrine for so long it had come to seem natural; the 47 Ronin's successful rebellion against it earned them their place in history.

As for CHUSHINGURA's length, this is merely chronological. Psychologically, the work eclipses time, seeming to end almost before it begins; no film we know succeeds so completely in transporting the viewer into the life and spirit of another age; for as long as it remains on the screen, the world we know is banished.

In Japanese literature, CHUSHINGURA occupies a place roughly analogous to HAMLET — which, in the person of its protagonist, Oishi, it most resembles.

In HAMLET, a revenge play whose hero cannot make up his mind, the dramatic action rises rapidly during the first act; then — as Hamlet vacillates — it agonizes through three acts before its violent conclusion in Act V. CHUSHINGURA'S structure is startlingly similar. In HAMLET, the springboard of the action is the murder of Hamlet's father — seen only as the Ghost. In CHUSHINGURA, the parallel role is played by Lord Asano, unjustly compelled to commit hara-kiri at the end of the first hour. Once aware that his father may have been murdered, Hamlet nevertheless puts off instant vengeance; since the Ghost may be a creature of Satan, he seeks more conclusive evidence. In CHUSHINGURA, Oishi must first determine whether Kira has not, in fact, died of the wounds inflicted upon him by Asano. Once it is established that Kira is alive, Oishi puts off vengeance in the hope of restoring Asano's house in the person of his brother. Finally, since Kira disposes of power far greater than his, Oishi must act circumspectly if the vendetta is to succeed.

HAMLET'S middle acts, fascinating for their poetry and characterization, nevertheless do little to advance the drama. This is paralleled in CHUSHINGURA, but only superficially;

as drama, the work is far superior to HAMLET. After Asano's death, while Oishi seeks the correct response to the injustice from which the whole Clan suffers, the vendetta goes into abeyance. This middle portion, which lasts about an hour, presents Oishi's choices in their total complexity. Unlike Hamlet's indecision, which resides partly in his personality and partly in Shakespeare's inability to resolve the conflict through the protagonist's own decision, Oishi's indecisiveness is caused by the hard social realities in which he finds himself. Oishi is not incapable of action; what he must decide is **how** to act.

Hamlet's motives have been debated for centuries precisely because they are unclear; Oishi's motives, though complex, are perfectly clear. Betrayed by the accountant, who absconds with the Clan's money, Oishi becomes less open to his friends. His seeming indifference to Lord Asano's fate camouflages his search for the proper course of action from friends and foes alike. The moment of decision comes in an expository scene so brief its significance is easily overlooked: we learn that Asano's brother has been placed in the custody of his main house for life. Now, with all hope of restoring the Clan ended, the vendetta can proceed. But even as he gathers his forces, Oishi must conceal his true feelings. We learn what they are only when Sampei Kayano, about to commit hara-kiri for accidentally killing an old woman, urgently demands to know Oishi's true intentions.

Structurally, Part II of CHUSHINGURA, the dramatic equivalent of HAMLET'S final act, is incomparably superior to it. Hamlet never succeeds in making up his mind; in consequence, Shakespeare's play lacks tragic inevitability; the denouement is brought on, not by the hero's purposefulness, but by the misfiring of the King's machinations. In CHUSHINGURA, once Oishi decides to go to Edo to accomplish the vendetta, the action rises inexorably to the triumphant final march.

No sensible person expects to understand HAMLET after only one exposure; to suppose that CHUSHINGURA — the major work of an alien culture — will be instantly accessible is equally unrealistic. No Occidental should expect CHUSHINGURA to be totally comprehensible after one viewing or even two; but further exposure brings unimaginable rewards in terms of deepened comprehension — and the film is totally understandable after several viewings.

It is doubtless true that Japan has a history vastly different from ours; for us, this only adds to the charm of its culture. But those who digest CHUSHINGURA'S implications will discover a humanity to which Occidentals can respond, and from which we have much to learn.