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福山節子



(HIGHEST RATING)

—Roger Ebert, *The Chicago Sun-Times*.

The rules in the village are simple. When you reach the age of 70, you must go up to the top of Narayama mountain and wait there until you die. "The Ballad of Narayama" is about an old woman whose time has almost arrived, and who is determined to take care of her family's unfinished business before she goes to the mountaintop. Most of that business concerns finding wives for her sons.

Stated that simply, "The Ballad of Narayama" sounds like humanism crossed with anthropology, sort of a "Woman of the Dunes" about death. But this movie is much more passionate than I've made it sound: darker, bloodier, more fearsome. It was directed by Shohei Imamura, whose films deal with the ways we pass laws to govern our deepest impulses, and then are driven to break those laws.

We see a poor village in the mountains, many years ago. It is a beautiful setting, a postcard, but life is raw and hard. The people work the fields in their bare feet, plowing the land and raising only enough potatoes and rice to barely feed themselves. Everybody knows everybody else's business.

That is particularly true of the old mother of the most important family. She is tireless, stubborn, willful. She wants to find wives for her sons. She turns up one wife—a new widow from across the valley—and shares her favorite recipes and the secret places in the river where you can catch fish with your bare hands. But this new wife turns out to be not quite the catch she seemed.

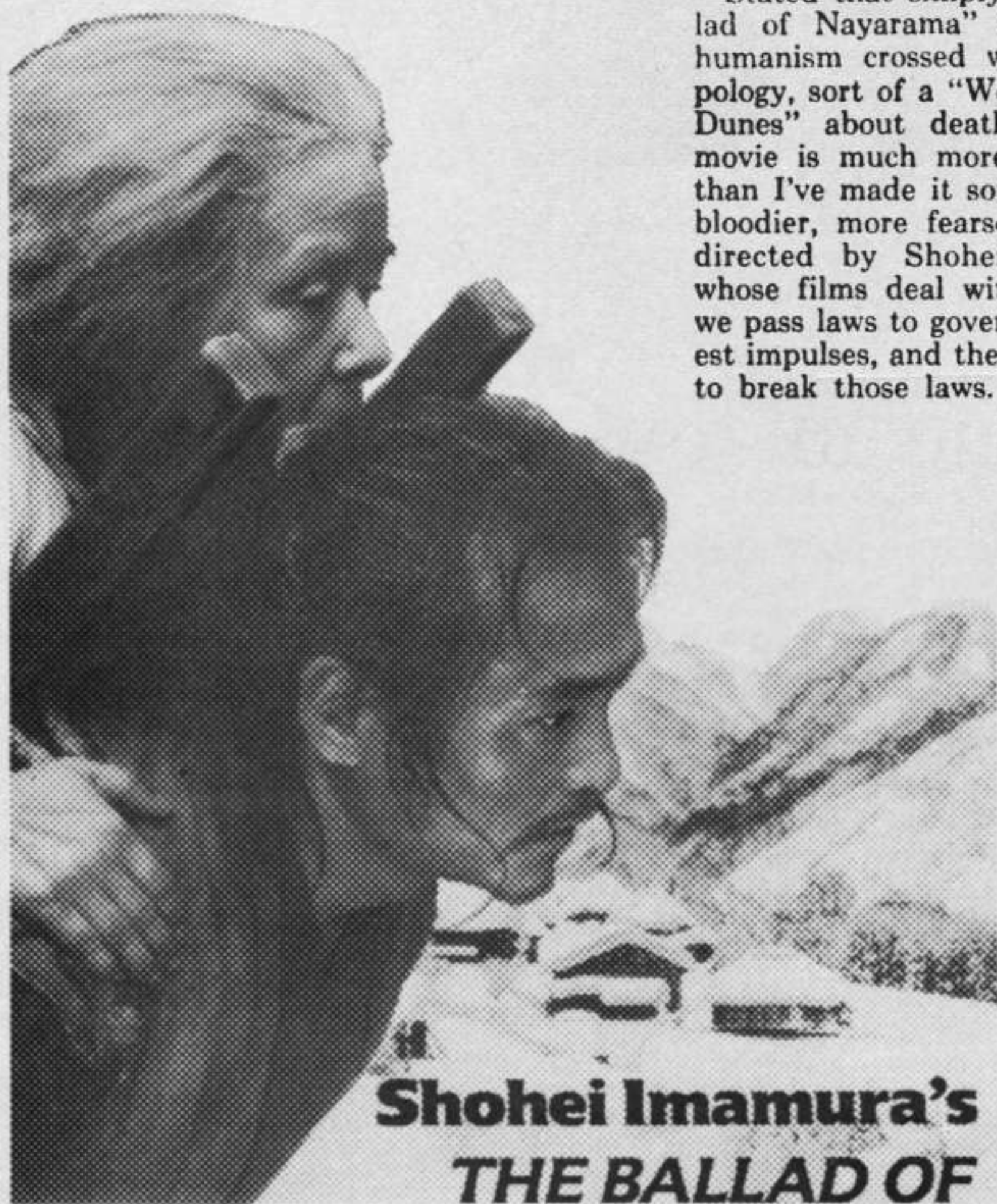
Meanwhile, another son, a universally scorned and hapless man known as the "stinker," creeps about the village, eavesdropping. He learns that a dying man has asked his wife to sleep with every man in the village at least once. This seems to be the stinker's chance, but it's not: The dead man's spirit turns into a butterfly that advises against the stinker.

Another son makes love with the daughter of a neighboring family, and gets her pregnant. But then the girl's father is exposed as a thief, and, in the movie's strongest and most painful image, the entire family is buried alive as punishment.

The final passages of the film have the oldest son taking his old mother up to the mountaintop. She is not sick, she is not about to die, but she is a woman of great determination and she demands to go to the mountaintop.

"The Ballad of Narayama" won the grand prize at Cannes last year, but it's not the sort of film that becomes a hit on the art film circuit—it's too introspective, too unblinking in the face of cruelty, too "Japanese." That makes it all the more a fascinating experience.

March 29, 1984



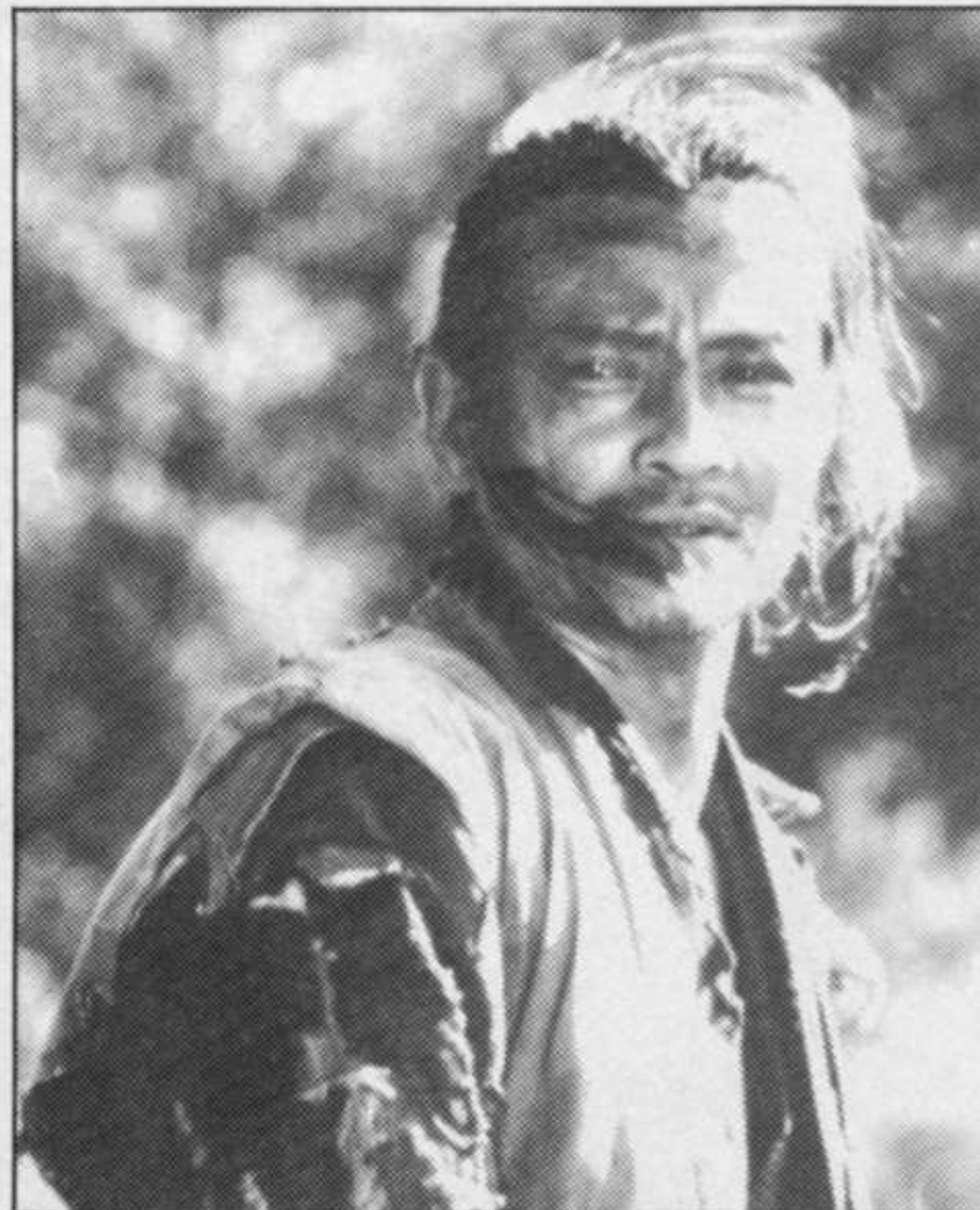
Shohei Imamura's
THE BALLAD OF

NARAYAMA

A Toei film starring Ken Ogata and Sumiko Sakamoto
Released by Kino International Corporation © 1984

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'Ballad of Narayama'

a revealing theme in few words

VIEWING A FILM like Shohei Imamura's "The Ballad of Narayama" turns out to be a crash course in everything that is right with Japanese movies and everything that is wrong with American movies. Imamura's film is poetic rather than explicit and audibly [and visually] quiet rather than full of noise.

"The Ballad of Narayama" is a very special movie, deserving more than its current three-day run, concluding Sunday, in the Film Center at the Art Institute, Columbus Drive at Jackson Boulevard. Let's see if one of our many new art film theaters has the financial courage to book it for an extended run.

"The Ballad of Narayama" is set in a remote rural village in the 19th Century. The film opens with long-distance shots that give the primitive village a fairy-tale aura.

The village's custom is that when the elders reach their 70th birthdays, they are taken by one of their children to Narayama mountain where they will be picked apart by birds and have their spirits liberated from their bodies.

The film focuses on one remarkable elderly woman, Orin [played convincingly by 47-year-old actress Sumiko Sakamoto], who begins to put her family affairs in order as her 70th birthday approaches. She arranges the marriage of her eldest son, a widower. She teaches her new daughter-in-law where to catch special fish with her

bare hands. Another son, sort of the black sheep of the family because of his disgusting stench, has to fend for himself.

ELSEWHERE IN THE village, food is in extremely short supply and strict laws carry severe punishments: Stealing food is punishable by death; baby girls can be put to death because, once grown, they eat more than they produce.

Sexual relations are consummated in natural settings at will—mostly at the male's will, but not always.

Against this striking portrait of primitive life, director Imamura repeatedly cuts away to animals copulating and devouring one another.

What do we make of the contrast? More man-made rules fail than work. The Japanese open attitude toward sex is liberating.

Beyond that, though, Imamura's film is visually fresh and exciting. He dares to portray a life spirit shaking a tree. He properly uses slow motion and, in effect, stop-action to heighten emotion. And, like so many foreign directors—and so few American directors—he makes nature as important a character as any human beings.

★★★★

Gene Siskel
Chicago Tribune

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