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MOVIE REVIEW

Masahiro Shinoda's 'Ballad of Orin'

BY KEVIN THOMAS

Times Staff Writer

With "The Ballad of Orin", Masahiro Shinoda, who may well be the greatest of Japan's younger directors, has once again created a romantic tragedy of the utmost beauty and emotional impact.

As in "Double Suicide," his best-known film in America, Shinoda tells of star-crossed lovers whose defiance of society exacts the highest possible toll. If anything, however, "Ballad of Orin" is even richer than "Double Suicide," which, as a stylized adaptation of an ancient puppet drama, was an exquisite miniature. But "Ballad of Orin" in contrast, is an odyssey that allows Shinoda to revel in the glories of nature in a way that in its piercing beauty underlines society's cruel alienation from it.

Once again, too, Shinoda's lovely and talented wife, Shima Awashita, stars. This time she plays a blind woman, Orin, who is abandoned at the age of 6 in her native coastal village in southern Japan and is taken in by a band of blind female samisen players.

The time is the late 19th century, and we're told that blind women could either support themselves as masseuses or prostitutes or become respected itinerant musicians who would be given food or money in return for performing their songs. Because of their concern for the preservation of this status—and for the very real vulnerability—they evolved a way of life as ritualized and codified as that of the geisha or the samurai. They were expected to remain chaste, and any violation of this code led to expulsion from the group.

Moving backward and forward in time as he tells Orin's story, Shinoda lets us know early on that Orin has violated this code—in truth, she is all but raped. There follows a period of wandering during which Orin allows herself to be exploited by one man after another in her craving for affection and security. But then she meets an enigmatic young man (Yoshio Harada) who is so struck by her beauty, which reminds him of a statue of Buddha, that he insists upon living with her as her brother rather than as her lover—much to her frustration.

In unraveling the fate of this couple, Shinoda and his writers don't spare the adversities, but so intense is Shinoda's poetic vision of life that he can sustain such woe. Indeed, the film develops a stinging sense of irony as Orin and her lover suffer amidst the most gorgeous natural settings. At the same time that Shinoda invites us to admire the beauty of a cypress, a crude wooden cart and his ill-fated couple silhouetted against seashore and mountains, that same man and woman are in the midst of a heart-rending parting. Such a paradox between beauty and pain lies at the greatness of the Japanese cinema.

Miss Awashita, who won the coveted Kinema Jumbo prize for her performance as Orin last year, remains as radiant as ever. Deep-voiced and rugged, Harada reminds one of the young Toshiro Mifune. These days, Masahiro Shinoda seems to be almost singlehandedly keeping alive the grand humanist tradition of Japanese films. "Ballad of Orin" is a film to be cherished.

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