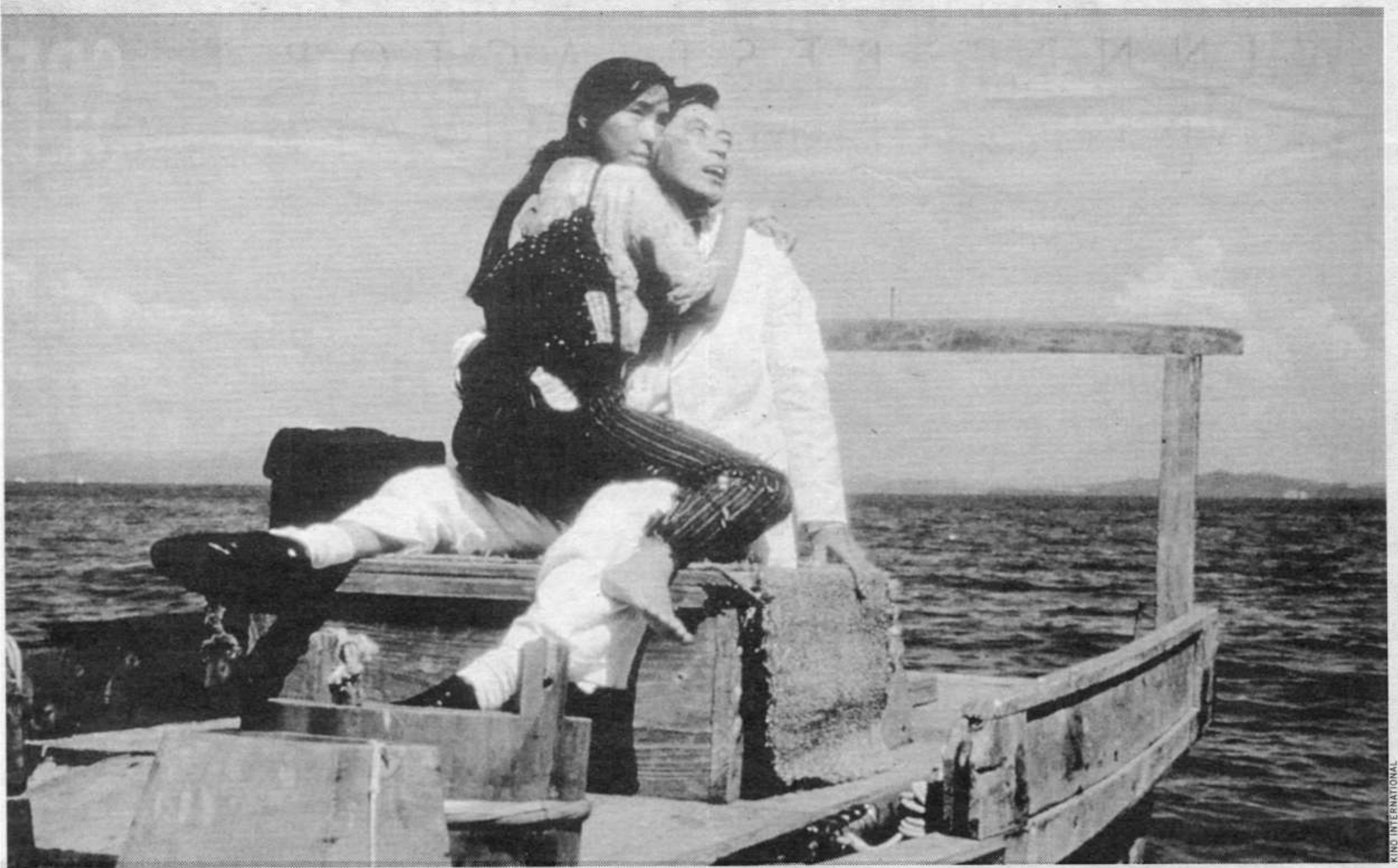


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Apocalypse wow: Kumiko Aso and Akira Emoto in *Dr. Akagi*

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# A Fine Mess

*Dr. Akagi*

Directed by Shohei Imamura  
Written by Imamura and Daisuke Tengan  
From stories by Ango Sakaguchi  
A Kino International release  
Opens January 15

**BY J. HOBERMAN**

Akira Emoto, the lead in *The Eel* is a crusader who is fighting his own war, conducting his own experiments, setting his own agenda: "Up there bombs, down here hepatitis." But Akagi is only one of the movie's raucous gallery of driven obsessives—embezzlers, drunken monks, morphine-addicted surgeons, and assorted sex fetishists. *Incorrigible* is an oft-used Imamura word, and it describes his sense of human nature. The army is

busy teaching old people the basics of civil defense. Superstition competes with science—and usually wins. Sonoko goes to work for Akagi despite the pleas of her orphaned siblings. ("Dear Sis—We're starving. Go back to whoring, please.") Imamura has compassion for just about everyone in this absurd universe, except maybe the race-crazed soldier who beats a Dutch P.O.W. to death.

Before the movie's end, Akagi has turned well-meaning mad scientist—digging up corpses and cutting out their livers, rigging up a giant microscope that seems suspiciously like a movie projector. One critic of the movie wondered why the audience never gets a subjective shot through Akagi's mi-

croscope—perhaps it is because a close-up of swarming bacteria would be too close to Imamura's own view of humanity's frenzied flux. If, at just over two hours, *Dr. Akagi* feels a bit sprawling, that is at least partially a function of its considerable vitality. "I like to make messy films," Imamura has said.

As a filmmaker, Imamura is capable of knocking out passages of polished formal beauty. But he is also usefully untidy—as idiosyncratic as any of his characters and as true to his own instincts. Whatever it is, *Dr. Akagi* is never predictable. For his final statement, the director has concocted an ending of unsurpassed weirdness and apocalyptic poetry involving a whale, a water nymph, and a mushroom cloud. **V**

**S**hohei Imamura has served notice that the long-germinating *Dr. Akagi* is his last movie. If so, Japan's 71-year-old master of bawdy black humor and enigmatic raunch has chosen to sign off with a thorough and characteristically wild recapitulation of his favorite themes.

*Dr. Akagi*, which had its local premiere at the last New York Film Festival and follows on the successful release of Imamura's *The Eel*, is a film about a Japanese country doctor and his patients scrambling to survive the final days of their disastrous Pacific War. As lively, irreverent, and bizarrely cheerful as any of Imamura's previous low-life sagas, *Dr. Akagi* is based on several stories by Ango Sakaguchi, a substance-abusing prodigy of the postwar period. But it may have an autobiographical backbeat: Imamura is the son of a country doctor (to whom the movie is dedicated) and was himself a teenager when World War II ended.

Shifting tone from shot to shot, *Dr. Akagi*'s opening is pure Imamura: American B-29s soar among the clouds while, on the ground below, a teenage sometime-hooker named Sonoko is squirming in the embrace of her hapless trick. Just then the couple is distracted by the heroic, heedless Dr. Akagi—in boater and bow tie—as he dashes madly down the beach and through the town, accompanied by a burst of cocktail jazz that suggests Lalo Schiffrin on pep pills.

Nicknamed "Dr. Liver" because he diagnoses everyone in this fishing village with hepatitis, Akagi (played by