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'Demon Pond' Is a Stunning Fantasy

By RICHARD SPRINGER

"Demon Pond" is a stunning film that brings legend to life. Famed Kabuki "onnagata" (an actor specializing in female roles) Tamasaburo Bando plays two roles: a mysterious, shy woman who may or may not be holding her husband under a spell; and a princess incarnation of the Dragon God who reigns unhappily away from her lover at the bottom of Demon Pond.

The look of this film has to be seen to be believed: the opening scenes of a botanist (Go Kato) scratching in the sand, his boot like a deer's hoof; an eerie encounter, backlit with a spectacular orange and red sky, between the botanist and the mysterious woman by a bubbling pond in the middle of a drought-stricken town; the underworld of the princess with creatures resembling a mixture of the "Star Wars" bar scene, punk rock models, and a samurai's nightmare; and a flood to end all floods—better than anything the special effects wizards in Hollywood have been able to come up with in the disaster film genre.

The film works on several levels: as fantasy, with the underworld gods strangely dependent upon the actions of the humans; as drama, with the botanist trying to rescue a long-lost friend from what he believes are the clutches of a spell-

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casting woman; as romance, with the woman and her husband refusing to let anything interfere with their love; as political statement, with a realistic picture of a supercilious official and vicious townspeople who allow their prejudices and cowardice to lead to witch-hunting and pagan sacrifice.

TIGHTROPE

The director, Masahiro Shinoda ("Double Suicide," "The Scandalous Adventures of Buraikan," "The Ballad of Orin"), has walked a tightrope in combining a magical anything-is-possible world of myth and fairy tale with a heavily melodramatic love story. One false step and the audience is likely to laugh at all the wrong places.

Shinoda, like Shakespeare, peoples his fantasy world with a combination of comic and regal characters. A half-man, half-catfish messenger provides needed comic relief between the earthly and underworldly melodramas. It's ironic that Japanese directors like Shinoda and Kurosawa have learned the most from the greatest English-language playwright.

The film does drag a bit in scenes detailing the relationship between the long-lost friend (Tutomu Yamazaki) and his mysterious wife. "Demon Pond" also needs more comic interplay among the odd creatures who serve the princess. One can guess that Shinoda, awed perhaps by Bando's talents, concentrated too single-mindedly on the Kabuki actor's two roles. Since the film has only one more week to run at the Kokusai, there's only a limited time to fall under Demon Pond's spell.

BAROCCO

"Barocco," playing for one week only at the Clay Theatre, is a classic example of a French "film noir." Isabelle Adjani, Gerard Depardieu and Marie-France Pisier star in a film that is either an intricate puzzle or an infuriating muddle, depending upon the audience's willingness to work through an intentionally obscure first half of the film. I don't think I reached any understanding of even the basic facts of "Barocco" until about an hour after it concluded. Some filmgoers faced with a film that elicits that kind of a reaction will demand their money back at the box office.

The film is a gem and will one day be recognized as such. "Barocco" needs a more careful exposition than I can give in this week's column, but my guess is that it will please moviegoers who enjoy films like "Blow-up," "Persona," or almost anything (except "Luna") by Bertolucci. □



Tamasaburo Bando has a double role in "Demon Pond."