

"It is a lot easier to stay with the establishment, but this is not my way of life"

Japanese film director Shohei Imamura speaks to the World Socialist Web Site

Richard Phillips
19 September 2000

Veteran film director, Shohei Imamura, recently visited Australia for "Under the Southern Cross", a two-day season of Japanese films screened in Canberra and Sydney as part of the Olympic Arts Festival.

Widely known and respected by lovers of serious cinema, the 74-year-old Imamura was a key figure in the Nuberu Bagu (Japanese New Wave) and rightly considered one of Japan's most important post-World War II directors. An uncompromising defender of the most oppressed layers in society, his films, which are intricate, dark and robust with great moments of earthy humour and complex sexuality, challenged the moral values of contemporary society, contrasting the corruption of the so-called new Japan with government promises of democracy and freedom. Imamura's characters are often poverty-stricken women and invariably social outcasts—prostitutes, pimps, pornographers, black marketeers or others on the margins of society—but always portrayed with the utmost objectivity.

*Born in 1926 in Tokyo, the son of a doctor, Imamura, was interested in the theatre at an early age and enrolled in literature studies in Waseda University in 1945, where he wrote plays and acted. On graduation in 1951 he joined Shochiku Films where he worked with several directors, including with Yasujiro Ozu on *Early Summer* (1951), *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice* (1952) and *Tokyo Story* (1953).*

*Reacting against what he considered to be Ozu's conservatism, rigid camerawork and overly formal relationship with his actors, Imamura transferred to the Nikkatsu studios in 1954, where he worked as an assistant director and scriptwriter before making three feature films in 1958—*Stolen Desire*, a black comedy about an itinerant acting troupe working in the rough-and-tumble red light districts, *Light of Night* and *Endless Desire*.*

*He then made *My Second Brother* (1959), which deals with the plight of four orphans in a poor Japanese mining town, and followed this in the 1960s with six brilliant films: *Pigs and Battleships* (1961), about teenagers attempting to survive by selling pigs fed on food wastes left by US occupying forces; *The Insect Woman* (1963), a tragicomedy tracing the life of a country girl forced into war production factories during the war and then, after Japan's defeat, into prostitution; *Unholy Desire* (1964), about rape and oppression; *The Pornographers—An Introduction to Anthropology*, (1965), a black comedy about a man involved in the blue movie industry who becomes obsessed with his lover's daughter; *Man Vanishes* (1967) and *The Profound Desire of the Gods* (1968).*

*In the 1970s Imamura directed *The History of Postwar Japan* as told by a Bar Hostess and *Vengeance is Mine*, and in the 1980s, *The Ballad of Narayama*, a graphic depiction of village life in 19th century Japan, *Zengen*, and *Black Rain*, about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. After a nine-year break he wrote and directed *The Eel* and *Dr Akagi* in 1998. The*

Ballad of Narayama and The Eel both won Palme d'Or awards at Cannes making him one of only three international directors who have twice won this award.

In the mid-1970s, following the breakdown of the Japanese studio system and dwindling opportunities for full-time cinema training, Imamura established the Japanese Academy of Visual Arts, which he still heads today. He spoke with Richard Phillips about some aspects of his life and work. Emiko Yamaguchi translated.

Richard Phillips: Could you explain your initial influences as a filmmaker, and why you decided to explore the lives of the most oppressed layers of society?

Shohei Imamura: Let me answer the first part of your question. I should tell you that I have very deep respect for Akira Kurosawa. This is someone that I idolised. At first I thought that he was a bit too rough but then learnt more about how he worked. For example, he used Toshiro Mifune in most of his films. I once visited Toho Studios and I saw Mifune and formed the opinion that he was not a good actor. He was really dreadful and had a dialect, a heavy accent in Japanese, and didn't seem to know the first thing about acting. But under the direction of Kurosawa he became a great performer. I was deeply impressed with how Kurosawa was able to mould Mifune from a ham into a really excellent actor.

RP: And the second part of my question?

SI: You are not the first one to ask me this question. Many people, not only in Japan, but also overseas have asked this. I'm not sure why you ask and I don't want you to look at my characters and say they are all oppressed or that they are the bottom of society. I don't agree with the way these people have been treated.

Many years ago, I was friendly with a well-known scriptwriter, who used to work with Yasujiro Ozu, and was staying with him at his holiday house. I was working on one of my scripts—it was a serious work—and he stood up from the fireplace, which was in the centre of the room, and came over and began reading the script over my shoulder. I thought this was a rather horrible and nasty thing to do, but then he said, "Oh you are still writing about beggars and all those dropouts from the mainstream of society."

I didn't like this comment and it really started to get on my nerves because I didn't think this was the correct way to characterise these people, the ones you call oppressed. Even though some of the things these people say might sound ridiculous, their lives and the experiences they pass through are true-life issues and their comments are from the heart. They are human beings and even though they might be at the bottom of society, what they say is true. And if you are not moved by what they say and do in my films, then it is really my fault, not theirs, because it means

that my films haven't accurately reflected their true feelings.

When I was younger I was angered about the comments of the big-guy filmmakers. I tried to rebel, but they just laughed at me. Unfortunately I couldn't really argue because they didn't treat me as an equal and so their statements hurt me very much.

After the comments from this leading scriptwriter I lay in bed that night and wondered how could I possibly argue against these big people. Then I decided, all right, if they don't like my ideas and treat them this way then I will only write about oppressed people all my life. I didn't say this openly, but kept it in my mind. I didn't have the confidence or the position to argue against them but this is what I decided to do.

RP: Could you comment on Japanese cinema and the present environment for filmmakers, compared to when you began making films?

SI: The way contemporary filmmakers approach their work can change rapidly, but if you ask me whether contemporary filmmakers are really looking straight into the social and political environment then I have to say it is quite dubious. There are many question marks about where contemporary films are heading and there are few films made today which indicate that the directors have a strong grip on the situation facing ordinary people. They don't seem to be able to look squarely at the real situation.

RP: Most of your films deal with the poverty and social problems of immediate post-war Japan. Are any contemporary filmmakers dealing with the social issues produced by unemployment, the ongoing economic recession in Japan today?

SI: No, there are very few filmmakers examining these issues. A director could explore some of these themes for a long time and then, after it has accumulated for a long time in his mind, one day it will explode to the surface as a work. Unfortunately there are not many filmmakers looking at these questions.

RP: Your film *Black Rain*, which is being screened in Sydney next weekend, explores the inner torment of the victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. The film is very powerful and concludes with a strong anti-war statement from one of the characters. Could you comment?

SI: *Black Rain* refers to the radiation that fell on people after the atomic bombing. Most of those covered with this rain suffered terrible health problems and many died. My film is based on the well-known novel by Masuji Ibuse, which tells about the problems facing a young woman who was covered with black rain and therefore has great difficulty finding a prospective husband.

The novel is long and we could not put everything in the film, so I had to be selective. I met and talked in depth with many bomb survivors and was able to get a first-hand understanding of the cruelty and horror of the bomb. Some of the victims were badly disfigured and it was difficult to look into their eyes. It was very hard to produce a script that fully conveyed the terrible horror of this event.

RP: What was the response to the film when you first screened it.

SI: It was shown to foreign press correspondents in Japan after it was first released and we asked for their comments. Some journalists declared that because the Japanese started the Pacific War they shouldn't be complaining about the consequences. These severe comments came from the journalists from neighbouring countries such as Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Korea.

I tried to counter these statements by explaining that even if the war was started by Japan we want people to recognise the consequences of atomic weapons and war. I am afraid my argument was not philosophical enough for the journalists and they didn't seem to agree.

In America, and many other countries, the general opinion was that the bombing was the right thing to do. Although thousands of people were killed in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, many still argue that it was justified. Irrespective of these views we have an obligation to pass on the facts of this terrible event and make use of this film in every way possible to show

the consequences of war.

RP: What role can cinema play in changing social life?

SI: It is a lot easier to be obedient and stay with the establishment, but this is not my way of life. I always try to change society completely with my films. Of course, filmmaking is not like catch. You can throw the ball but there is no guarantee that it will be caught.

RP: What is the most important quality that young filmmakers must develop today?

SI: I am quite old now and have had many experiences that allow me to answer this question. I have been writing film scenarios for many years but sometimes feel that things I have said have been exaggerated, or not reported accurately. So whenever I am writing a script I am very aware that my films must be true.

This situation also confronts young scenario writers. They might get a good idea, become deeply involved in it and get so carried away with this idea that they end up telling lies. I think the most important thing is that their art must be true.

Another crucial quality for young filmmakers is courage. They must have courage to cut off any part of their film that is not true or accurate.

Let me give you an example. Near the end of *Black Rain*, the young girl is becoming ill from the fever caused by the radiation and starts to hallucinate. Everyone begins to realise that her days are numbered. Her uncle takes her to a pond where he had put some small carp fish months earlier. There are pampas grasses alongside the pond and it is quite a cold day. Suddenly a large carp jumps out of the pond and they are both very excited. The fish is about a metre long and she starts hitting the pampas grasses with her shawl in excitement and the pollen starts floating in the air, almost like snow.

This is an extremely beautiful and emotional scene but if it were extended it would become a lie. The impact of this scene on the audience is strong because it conveys the loneliness and sorrow of the young girl and the suffering of her uncle. It moves the viewers and demonstrates how sad and difficult it is to be a radiation victim.

Toru Takemitsu, a well-known Japanese composer who did the music for the movie, asked me to extend this scene because it is very good emotionally. But it has always been my policy not to get carried away by emotions and I was surprised that this brilliant composer wanted me to extend the scene.

So there was always a conflict between my policy of not being too emotional and being true to the fact, without being cold and not reaching the audience. This is a good example of how you must resist the pressures of others and hold to your own values. I have always insisted that I would never tell lies in my movies, to only tell the truth. This is a big principle for me.

In recent years, however, I have begun to explore fantasies. At the moment I am working on a new script about a woman passing through menopause who has fantasies and shoplifts. In this script I have to create her fantasies, so the difficulty is in creating truthful fantasies, or moments that are not exactly true in life. This is an interesting contradiction.



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