

25th March 2013

## Onibaba (Devil Woman) (15)

Director: **Kaneto Shindô**

Japan 1964 In Japanese with English subtitles

Running time : 103 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Nobuko Otowa** (Kichi's mother), **Jitsuko Yoshimura** (Kichi's wife), **Kei Satô** (Hachi), **Taiji Tonoyama** (Ushi).

SCRIPT: **Kaneto Shindô**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Kiyomi Kuroda**. EDITING: **Toshio Enoki**. MUSIC: **Hikaru Hayashi**.

### *Reveals minor plot details*

*Onibaba* (the name means 'demon hag') is an important film in the Japanese canon. It is probably the best known work of its director, Kaneto Shindô, who died last year aged 100, occasioning a major retrospective at the NFT in London.

The film does not so much open as burst upon us in an assault of raw, elemental imagery and nerve-jangling Taiko drumming. The wife and mother of Kichi, who is forced to go away to fight in a meaningless war in 14th century Japan, eke out an existence in the midst of a reed marsh on the edge of a river. Their dwelling is cramped and humble, and admits little in the way of privacy, promoting an intimacy which can lead to mutual torment as easily as it can to co-operation.

Before long the women take to preying on wandering samurai and disposing of their bodies in a deep pit. When a deserter and friend of Kichi's comes by, telling of his demise, the widow takes to sleeping with him and the mother fears that she will be left on her own. This leads her to take outlandish, and ultimately catastrophic, measures to ensure the girl stays and sins no more.

Shindô was an acolyte of the great Kenji Mizoguchi and continued with his themes of strong women and weak men, which in this film is epitomized by the two lead women's livelihood of luring samurai to their deaths in order to strip them of their armour and weapons which they then sell. Not only women, they are also peasants who were below samurai in the Japanese caste system and, as such, the film is indicative of a trend in sixties Japanese cinema of deconstructing much of the traditional mythology around honourable warriors and the code of bushido. This mirrored cinematic developments elsewhere (the spaghetti Western etc.), reflecting the social and political upheavals in all major industrial societies of the time.

The themes of physical disfigurement and mutilation reflect Shindô's interest in Hiroshima and its aftermath. A native of Hiroshima, he made the first film to deal with this very sensitive subject (*Children of Hiroshima*, in 1952). During the war, he had been conscripted to join a unit where 94 men out of a total of 100 were killed. (He was only saved from this fate by not being called to the front.) This experience left him with an abiding feeling of the senselessness of conflict, a scepticism that comes through strongly in *Onibaba*, where samurai, who dedicated their lives to martial combat, could be vanquished by the guile and sheer drive for survival of two peasant women.

It is hard to describe the physical impact of the film still, so many years after its making. Originally denied a release in this country, it was eventually granted an 'X' certificate by the British Censor in 1968, but with cuts. Reviewed by the BBFC in 1994 it was then given the present certification with cuts restored. It is relatively frank, sexually, for its time, though no more than Ingmar Bergman's *The Silence* really. It is the combination of sex and the more horrific elements, we think, that got under skins in 1964 – it was probably thought perverse, like the Mario Bava horror *The Mask of Satan*. But where the Bava may have been strong meat compared with a Hammer horror, *Onibaba* makes it look like *Carry on Screaming!*

**Alan Gross & David Clare**