JAPAN 2021: 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

A Page of Madness (Kurutta ichipeiji)

Probably the most famous of all surviving Japanese films of the 1920s, *A Page of Madness* resulted from the unique collaboration between former *onnagata* (male actor playing female roles) star Teinosuke Kinugasa as director, and Yasunari Kawabata, the prominent novelist of Shinkankakuha (the New Perceptions School), as writer. It's the first Japanese avant-garde feature, its stunning visuals comprising a magnificent mixture of different modes and influences: modern dance and traditional Japanese masks, the uncanny setting and chiaroscuro lighting of German Expressionist cinema, and the fast montage of that same era's French Impressionist films. Set in a rural asylum, its psychologically poignant story includes vivid depictions of insanity and the madly rhythmic body.

Hideaki Fujiki, bfi.org.uk

'A Page of Madness' reviewed upon its rediscovery in the 1970s

Kinugasa's *A Page of Madness* turned up as a last-minute fringe event in the National Film Theatre's recent Japanese season, and proved to be a remarkable visual experiment seemingly years ahead of its time. Like the only other early Kinugasa film known here, *Crossways*, it has a dreamlike continuity somewhat reminiscent of those textbook American and French avant-garde 'classics'. Then one remembers its production date: 1926. Although Kinugasa might at that date have seen *Caligari*, *The Last Laugh* (see the last corridor shot of his film) and the Gance of *La Roue*, his use of abstract imagery is more radical and innovatory. The film culminates in several hallucinatory sequences built up from layers of superimpositions, in which we seem to be inside the minds of the patients in a lunatic asylum as the real world dissolves around them into anguish and unreason.

A Page of Madness takes place almost entirely within the confines of the asylum, and follows the pathetic attempts of an old seaman, now working as a janitor, to release his wife, who has been incarcerated since an attempt to drown herself and her baby son. He dreams of their earlier happy life, becomes involved in an asylum riot, and, after the wife has refused to leave, resigns himself to a dreary life of sweeping and cleaning. Daringly, the film was made without titles; which makes it difficult for a Western audience to pinpoint all the interweaving plot strands. On a second viewing, the divisions between reality and fantasy become much clearer.

Nothing, however, can obscure the richness of Kinugasa's invention: a tracking camera moves down a corridor into a struggling melee of patients and doctors and then retreats back through the heaving bodies; the wife gazes moodily at a tree in the garden, which suddenly contracts as though in a fairground mirror; a girl dancing in her cell turns into an obscene blob as the crazy men ogle her. Everywhere images of bars cut across the screen, blurring and distorting faces and cutting off the inmates from the hard-pressed staff. The surrealist force of this imagery presumably stems from the scenario of Yasunari Kawabata (author of *Snow Country*); yet the continually probing, moving camera and use of revolving objects suffused in a tinselly

light looks forward to Kinugasa's later *Crossways*. The whole *mise en scène*, as well as the mature acting style, suggests a phenomenal sophistication for the time.

Made in a small, ill-equipped studio, *A Page of Madness* was understandably a commercial failure on its original release. Apparently, it lay unnoticed for over 40 years until Kinugasa discovered a copy in his garden storeroom. Its recent reappraisal in Japan and Europe has given Kinugasa a new lease of life: he has declared it to be the favourite of his hundred films and feels himself to be a modern cineaste again. Certainly, this discovery is a major event, confirming that the Japanese 1920s is yet another goldmine waiting to be opened up.

John Gillett, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1972/3

Kinugasa's remarkable film, only recently rediscovered by the director and now released with an added music track for projection at sound speed, is avant-garde in the true sense: it evidences a pioneering cinematic mind at work exploring and expanding the medium at high intensity. Like several of his key Soviet and European contemporaries (whose work was, however, unknown to him at the time), Kinugasa chooses the subject of insanity as the vehicle for his experiments. His film has two distinct lines of development, closely related both formally and rhythmically. One is the tragic melodrama of the narrative, developed – without explanatory or dialogue titles – through an intricate pattern of flashbacks. The other comprises the more general sequences which seek to present the experience and perceptions of the insane, and it is here that Kinugasa makes his most adventurous innovations in form. The two lines are woven together so closely that 'present reality' sequences are constantly shifting into flashbacks or fantasies, as unpredictably as the onset of a patient's delirium.

Kinugasa opens the film by plunging the audience into active experience of the irrational: a rapid-fire montage composed of anarchic images of a storm gradually takes on a quasi-musical rhythm, whose erotic charge is confirmed when the fragmented images give way to the scene of an exotically costumed girl dancing frenetically in a bizarre room. But this vision is in tum succeeded by the actuality of a girl in her tattered dress dancing in her bare asylum cell until her feet bleed, helplessly in the grip of an inner compulsion. The sequence illustrates the method that Kinugasa consistently employs in the film, of taking the audience to the emotional or sensual heart of a scene before allowing them the comfort of any intellectual perspective on it, and then undercutting that seeming objectivity with a new visual shock. His visual repertoire extends freely to the use of superimpositions, distortions, shifts of focus and whip-pans to conjure an entirely original expressionist vision.

The visual flux of the film, throughout comparing 'anarchic' madness with 'pathetic' sanity, finally resolves into an extraordinary denouement: the sadder, wiser janitor places smiling masks on the faces of the inmates, and then dons a tearful one himself. It is a devastating image for the conspiracy of 'normal' society to camouflage its deviations, as well as being Kinugasa's resigned admission that the areas the film has exposed must be discreetly covered over again. The challenge of *A Page of Madness* is, of course, much the same challenge as Artaud exploded in the theatre, and the film is strikingly modern in its anticipations of current psychoanalytic theory. With Kinugasa rests the distinction of having created an aesthetic form that fully expresses the momentousness of this theme.

Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1973

A PAGE OF MADNESS (KURUTTA ICHIPEIJI)
Director: Teinosuke Kinugasa
Production Company:
Shin Kankaku-Ha Eiga Renmei
Producer: Teinosuke Kinugasa
Assistant Director: Eiichi Koishi
Script: Yasunari Kawabata
Photography: Kohei Sugiyama
Art Director: Chiyo Ozaki
Music: Minoru Muraoka, Toru Kurashima

Cast
Masao Inoue *(odd job man)*
Yoshie Nakagawa *(wife)*
Ayako Iijima *(daughter)*
Hiroshi Nemoto *(young man)*
Misao Seki *(doctor)*
Minoru Takase *(1st madman)*
Kyosuke Takamatsu *(2nd madman)*
Tetsu Tsuboi *(3rd madman)*
Eiko Minami *(dancing girl)*

Japan 1926
70 mins

With live piano accompaniment by
Stephen Horne (Sat 23 Oct)

With Alloy Orchestra score (Mon 15 Nov)

Supported by:

GS Grand Seiko

In partnership with:

JAPANFOUNDATION

With special thanks to:

NFAJ 国立映画アーカイブ National Film Archive of Japan
東宝 TOHO
Shochiku Cinema 100 TH SINCE 1920

With the kind support of:
Janus Films/The Criterion Collection, Kadokawa Corporation, Kawakita Memorial Film Institute, Kokusai Hoei Co. Ltd, Nikkatsu Corporation, Toei Co. Ltd

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at **www.bfi.org.uk/signup**

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at **bfi.org.uk/join**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on **player.bfi.org.uk**

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit
Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk
The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780