



**JAPAN 2021: 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA**

# Onibaba

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Kaneto Shindo's best-known feature still packs a genuine wallop for its violence, its startlingly explicit sexuality (it's not remotely surprising that the BBFC rejected it outright on first submission and scissored it second time round) and its almost Beckettian view of a conflict-ridden world reduced to a gigantic field of untamed susuki grass, in which people scrape a barely subsistence-level living by preying on others who are either permanently or temporarily weaker than themselves.

The two women at its heart are never named, but we can tell everything about them from the way they behave when they ruthlessly spear two samurai to death, dump the bodies in what appears to be an unfathomably deep hole and swap the men's possessions for a meagre bag of millet. Like animal scavengers, their actions are dispassionately practical, their amorality driven by the need to survive without their presumed-dead menfolk. But when the soldier Hachi arrives to pass on news of the younger woman's husband, they experience a different kind of hunger, and the resulting urges underpinning almost everything thereafter give the film's overtly demonic final act a much more potent psychological charge than it had in the Buddhist fable that inspired Shindo. In the original, the younger woman provoked the older woman's jealousy purely through her religious self-betterment, whereas here both women's impulses are all too primal.

But *Onibaba's* lasting greatness and undimmed potency lie in the fact that it works both as an unnervingly blunt horror film (and how!) and as a far more nuanced but nonetheless universal social critique that can easily be applied to any parallel situation – even, as Doug Cummings points out, a futuristic post-apocalyptic one. Although the title literally translates as 'The Demoness', Shindo makes it clear that the women are as much victims of their lowly status and unfortunate circumstances as they are agents of their own destruction.

**Michael Brooke, *Sight & Sound*, April 2013**

## **A contemporary review**

Kaneto Shindo obviously likes to milk his situations for all they are worth – and then some. In *The Island*, two uncommunicative peasants haul endless buckets of water up and down a hillside, until it eventually becomes apparent that their silence is merely an artifice designed to inject drama into the situation; in *Ningen*, four assorted people are set adrift in a boat, and it only requires a little manipulation to persuade cannibalism, heightened by a cunning assortment of emotions, to rear its ugly head.

*Onibaba*, made by exactly the same team, has the same striking surface as the two earlier films, and the same tendency to fall apart if examined too closely. But, if impossible to take seriously, *Onibaba* is at least amusing in its extravagance (much grunting, rushing about, and howling at the moon by the frustrated lovers; murder victims despatched with a lurid ruthlessness worthy of a Hammer horror), and Kiyomi Kuroda's fine photography makes the most

of the bizarre setting: a marshy plain beside a river, completely overgrown with tall, waving reeds. In the opening sequence, two horsemen gallop down the river bank, two fleeing samurai thread their way through the forest of reeds, their path betrayed only by ripples on the surface, until glittering spears suddenly stab out of the darkness at them. Nothing else in the film quite matches this opening among the reeds, or its aftermath in the ruthless stripping of the victims and disposal of their corpses, except perhaps the encounter between the old woman and the General. Here, as she warily picks her way through the moonlit swamp, followed by the ghostly stranger in the demon mask, the film suddenly acquires, momentarily, the quality of legend which Shindo was presumably after all along.

**Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1966**

#### ONIBABA

*Director:* Kaneto Shindo  
*Production Companies:* Kindai Eiga Kyokai, Tokyo Eiga  
*Executive Producers:* Hisao Itoya, Setsuo Noto, Tamotsu Minato  
*Producer:* Toshio Konya  
*Screenplay:* Kaneto Shindo  
*Director of Photography:* Kiyomi Kuroda  
*Editor:* Toshio Enoki  
*Art Director:* Kaneto Shindo  
*Music:* Hikaru Hayashi

#### Cast

Nobuko Otowa (*mother*)  
Jitsuko Yoshimura (*daughter-in-law*)  
Kei Sato (*Hachi*)  
Taiji Tonomura (*Ushi, the merchant*)  
Jūkichi Uno (*warrior*)  
Tatsuya Nakadai (*Onimasa*)

Japan 1964  
103 mins

#### JAPAN 2021

##### 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

###### Onibaba

Fri 19 Nov 20:50; Tue 30 Nov 17:50

###### An Actor's Revenge (Yukinojō henge)

Sat 20 Nov 12:15

###### Early Spring (Sōshun)

Sat 20 Nov 14:50; Tue 23 Nov 17:40

###### Tokyo Olympiad (Tōkyō orinpikku)

Sat 20 Nov 16:40; Wed 24 Nov 18:40

###### Early Summer (Bakushū)

Sun 21 Nov 11:30

###### Love Letter (Koibumi)

Sun 21 Nov 14:40 (+ intro)

###### An Inn at Osaka (Ōsaka no yado)

Sun 21 Nov 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro)

###### The Flavour of Green Tea over Rice (Ochazuke no aji)

Tue 23 Nov 14:40

###### Godzilla (Gojira)

Tue 23 Nov 20:40

###### Marital Relations (Meoto zenzai)

Thu 25 Nov 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro)

###### Yojimbo

Fri 26 Nov 18:10; Sun 28 Nov 12:00

###### Yearning (Midareru)

Fri 26 Nov 21:00

###### Elegant Beast (aka The Graceful Brute)

###### (Shitoyakana kedamono)

Sat 27 Nov 18:30 (+ pre-recorded intro)

###### Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-jō)

Sat 27 Nov 20:50

###### Silent Cinema presents: I Was Born, But...

###### (Otona no miru ehon – Umarete wa mita keredo)

Sun 28 Nov 14:45 (+ intro)

###### Sansho the Bailiff (Sansho Dayu)

Sun 28 Nov 18:20

###### Tokyo Story (Tōkyō monogatari)

Tue 30 Nov 14:00

###### She Was Like a Wild Chrysanthemum

###### (Nogiku no gotoki kimi nariki)

Tue 30 Nov 20:40

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