

Death by Hanging

(Kôshikei)

Staff

Production Sôzôsha, Art Theatre Guild of Japan
Producer Nakajima Masayuki, Yamaguchi Takuji, Ôshima Nagisa
Director Ôshima Nagisa
Screenplay Fukao Michinori, Tamura Tsutomu, Sasaki Mamoru, Ôshima Nagisa
Photography Yoshioka Yasuhiro
Editing Uraoka Keiichi
Sound Nishizaki Hideo
Lighting Togashi Hiroya
Music Hayashi Hikaru
Art direction Toda Jûshô

Cast

Yun Yun-Do, Satô Kei, Watanabe Fumio, Ishidô Toshirô, Adachi Masao, Toura Rokkô, Matsuda Masao, Komatsu Hôsei, Koyama Akiko, Ôshima Nagisa

Release date: February 3, 1968

119 min.; B&W; 1:1.85; 35mm

Kôshikei (Death By Hanging) was the first of five films that Ôshima Nagisa made in cooperation with the Art Theatre Guild, the others being *Shônene* (Boy, 1969), *Tôkyô sensô sengo hiwa* (The Man Who Left His Will On Film, 1969), *Gishiki* (The Ceremony, 1971), and *Natsu no imôto* (Little Summer Sister, 1973). In addition, ATG distributed *Ninja bugeichô* (Manual of Ninja Martial Arts, 1967) and *Shinjuku dorobô nikki* (Diary of a Shinjuku Thief, 1968), and *Yunbogi no nikki* (Yunbogi's Diary, 1965) had its premiere at ATG's Shinjuku Bunka cinema. It is fair to say that ATG was pivotal for Ôshima's middle period, very much like Ôshima was decisive for the Art Theater Guild. The success of the screenings of Ôshima's *Yunbogi no nikki* at the Shinjuku Bunka in December 1965 was together with the success of Mishima Yukio's sole directorial work *Yûkoku* (Patriotism, 1966) decisive for ATG's decision to start producing its own films. Although Imamura Shôhei's *Ningen jôhatsu* (A Man Vanishes, 1967) was the first film credited to ATG as co-producer, ATG was not involved in its planning. The first film planned by ATG was Ôshima's *Kôshikei*.

Kôshikei was a project that Ôshima had carried about for quite a while. Model for the film was the so-called "Komatsukawa incident", the rape and murder of a high school girl and a young woman by the 18 year old Korean Ri Chin'u in August 1958. Ri who displayed no remorse nor wish to reform was sentenced to death and hung in November 1962. The extraordinary circumstances of the case – Ri called the newspapers, talked about how he had killed the victims and gave hints as tease for the investigation – occupied press and public and inspired a number of works such as Kinoshita Junji's TV-drama *Kuchibue ga fuyu no sora ni* (A Whistle in the Winter Sky, 1961), Shirasaka Yoshio's screenplay *Tanin no chi* (The Blood of Others, 1962) and Ôe Kenzaburô's novel *Sakebigoe* (Cry, 1963). In spring 1963, a few months after the execution of Ri's death penalty, Ôshima asked Fukao Michinori, author of the screenplay for *Amakusa Shirô Tokisada* (Shiro Amakusa, the Christian Rebel; 1962), to write a screenplay. The first draft, *Itsu de mo nai itsu ka, doko de mo nai doko ka* (Sometime never, someplace nowhere), was a rather straightforward account of Ri's motivation as a murderer, the second draft, *Mienai shônene* (The invisible boy),

concentrated more on Ri's inner world. It was not until he found a co-producer in the Art Theatre Guild, however, that Ôshima could finally realize the project. The *zainichi*-problem (the issue of the Korean minority in Japan) features prominently in Ôshima's films of that period. The TV-documentary *Wasurerareta kôgun* (The Forgotten Army, 1963) is about war invalid Koreans who were forced to fight for imperial Japan during the war but are denied benefits after the war since they are not Japanese citizens; the TV-documentary *Seishun no ki* (A monument to Youth, 1964) about the Korean student radical Park Ok He; *Yunbogi no nikki* (Yunbogi's Diary, 1965), a montage of photos of orphaned street children in Seoul that Ôshima took while shooting *Seishun no ki*; *Nihon shunka-kô* (A Treatise on Japanese Bawdy Songs, 1967) which mocks the origins of Japan as divine nation and maintains the Korean descent of the imperial family; and the black comedy *Kaette kita yopparai* (Three Resurrected Drunkards, 1968) in which a Korean desert from Vietnam pretends to be a Japanese. An important source for *Kôshikei* was the correspondence between Ri Chin'u and the journalist Bok Junan, which was published in 1963 by San'ichi Shobo under the title *Tsumi to shi to ai to* (Crime and Death and Love). Some scenes in the second half of the film such as parts of the conversation between R and his "sister", of R's monologue and letter extracts are almost literal quotations from these letters.

Kôshikei is arguably Ôshima's most experimental and abstract film. The film begins with the execution of the convict R. He does not die, however, but loses his memory. In order to repeat the execution it is necessary that R regains his memory, remember and confess his crime and recognize his identity. Only when the attendant representatives of the state – district attorney, secretary of the Public Prosecutor, prison warden, Chief of guards, education officer, doctor and priest – have succeeded in doing so will they feel authorized to execute R again. Obsessed by their obligation to the logic of a demented legalism they try hard to convince R that he is Korean, that he has led a miserable life, that therefore he had committed a crime for which he now must be punished. None of them, however, can answer R's question what it means to be a Korean. They start to re-enact R's past and find themselves actually committing R's crime. The victim awakens and becomes R's sister, who through symbolic intercourse leads him to the awareness that he is R. R admits to his crimes, but refuses to be punished by the state.

The film is structured into seven chapters which through discussions and ever-increasingly absurd re-enactments address a variety of topics such as death penalty, ethnicity and Korean identity, juvenile crime and poverty, sexuality and imagination, nationality, and the question of Self and Other. In its continual play with reality and fantasy and the employment of Brechtian devices of distancing the film oscillates between different levels of theatricality and is a subversive and provocative critique of the hypocrisy of Japan's social politics that foster conformity and homogeneity at the expense of inclusion and diversity.

Due to the rather low budget of 10 million Yen, evenly split between ATG and Ôshima's production company Sôzôsha, the film was shot in a relatively short period between end of November and end of December 1967. The entire film was, except for a few location shots, shot in a single set designed by Toda Jûshô. The death chamber set was built in the Shibakôkan, an abandoned cinema which was managed by Kuzui Kinshirô before he took over the management of ATG's Shinjuku Bunka theatre. Besides using professional actors such as his wife Koyama Akiko, Komatsu Hôsei, Taura Rokkô and Watanabe Fumio, who appeared regularly in Ôshima's films and had helped launch the production company Sôzôsha, Ôshima entrusted roles to close friends and collaborators such as Ishidô Toshirô, Ôshima's assistant director from Shôchiku days and scriptwriter of several of his films, filmmaker Adachi Masao, who was responsible for the film's trailer, and film critic Matsuda Masao. The role of R was played by the *zainichi* Yun Yun-Do who also had no prior acting experience. He continued to work with Ôshima as assistant director for his subsequent films and later became president of the publisher Banseisha.

Kôshikei was released on February 3, 1968 in the cinemas of the ATG chain and became an instant success. After its initial one month run in the ATG cinemas the film was shown from March 9–15 in the cinemas of Tôhô as double bill with Shindô Kaneto`s *Yabu no naka no kuroneko* (Kuroneko, 1968).

Roland Domenig