Double Suicide
(Shinjû ten no Amijima)

Staff
Production  Hyôgensha, Art Theatre Guild of Japan
Producer  Shinoda Masahiro, Nakajima Masayuki
Director  Shinoda Masahiro
Screenplay  Tomioka Taeko, Takemitsu Tôru, Shinoda Masahiro (after a play by Chikamatsu Monzaemon)
Photography  Narushima Tôichirô
Editing  Shinoda Masahiro
Sound  Nishizaki Hideo
Lighting  Okuyama Yasuo
Music  Takemitsu Tôru
Art direction  Awazu Kiyoshi, Hayashi Yoshikazu

Cast
Nakamura Kichiemon, Iwashita Shima, Kawarasaki Shizue, Hidari Tokie, Hidaka Sumiko,
Komatsu Hôsei, Takita Yûsuke, Katô Yoshi, Fujiwara Kamatari, Hamamura Jun, Nakamura
Kichizô, Akatsuka Makoto, Tsuchiya Shinji

Release date: May 24, 1969 (X-rated)
104 min.; B&W; 1:1.33; 35mm

Shinjû ten no Amijima (Double Suicide) was Shinoda Masahiro’s first ATG production. Together with Ôshima Nagisa and Yoshida Kijû he had initiated the so-called Shôchiku Nouvelle Vague in the early 1960s. Shinjû ten no Amijima is Shinoda’s most avantgardistic and doubtlessly one of his most prestigious films. The film is based on a bunraku puppet drama by Chikamatsu Monzaemon which belongs to the category of sewamono, i.e. plays about the merchant class. Chikamatsu wrote 11 double suicide dramas altogether, and Shinjû ten no Amijima, first performed in 1720, was his penultimate drama in this genre, which he wrote when he was 68 years old. In 1703 Chikamatsu had written the bunraku drama Sonezaki shinjû (Double suicide at Sonezaki) for the famous jôruri reciter Takemoto Gidayu. The play was based on a real life incident that occurred in the April of that year and became an instant success. In fact, it was so successful that the debt-ridden Takemoto-za theatre could repay all its liabilities. Shinjû ten no Amijima, too, was a so-called “real event play” (kiwamono) based on a real life double suicide that had happened in October 1720 at Daichôji temple in Ôsaka’s Amijima district.

During his studies at Waseda University Shinoda had attended classes of Kawatake Shigetoshi, a leading authority in kabuki and kyôgen studies, who was married to late Kabuki playwright Kawatake Mokuami’s daughter. Shinoda was introduced to Chikamatsu’s plays by Kawatake, and in 1969 he gave a lecture on Shinjû ten no Amijima for the Scenario Studies Group (Shinario kenkyûjô) which was later published in the September 1969 issue of the monthly magazine Gekkan Shinario under the title “Kurogo no hassô” (The conception of kurogo). In this long and quite complex article Shinoda stresses the “difficulty of finding an adequate modern verbal expression for the jôruri language of Chikamatsu’s time which the film must communicate” and demands “that the words must work like a melody”. He also articulates the idea of using kurogo, the stagehands dressed in black of the bunraku puppet theatre, in films. “In bunraku the puppet players essentially wear black clothes. What really shocked me was a scene in which a puppet plays a shamisen. From
the puppet’s sleeve a real hand appeared and started to play the shamisen. The hand transcended the puppet and the exposed part of the kurogo disclosed the puppet player. I thought that this part was nothing less than the intention of Chikamatsu to write this play”. Shinoda finds a clue for the kurogo’s existence in Chikamatsu’s famous Kyōjitsu hiniku-ron (“Doctrine of the Interspace of the skin membranes between irreal and real being”) recorded by the Confucian scholar Hazumi Ikan (1682–1769) in his book Naniwa miyage (Souvenir from Naniwa, 1738). Chikamatsu essentially maintains that Art is something that lies in the slender margin between the real and the unreal, i.e. between reality and fiction.

In a comparison of Chikamatsu’s Shinjū ten no Amijima and his earlier Sonezaki shinjū Shinoda notices the rhythmic repetition of the phrase “bridge” in the michiyuki scenes of the play, i.e. the lyric compositions of scenery. In Sonezaki shinjū it is used in a more psychological way, whereas in Shinjū ten no Amijima it is used in a more existential way. The final farewell scene at the bridge does not so much explain why Jihei and Oharu are in love with each other and why they want to die, but rather ascertains the fact that there is a man and a woman who want to die. “This itself is nothing but ‘death’. We must re-interpret this scene from an extremely modernistic perspective and must find an expression that explores death sensuously as one vision and as a philosophical world within us.”

The film begins backstage of the bunraku set with images of loose heads, hands and other parts of the puppets while on the sound level we hear a telephone conversation between Shinoda and the Osaka-born poet and novelist Tomioka Taeko who wrote the screenplay for the film (that the composer Takemitsu Tōru is credited as co-author is probably due to the fact that he captured words as melody). Shinoda explains his idea for the michiyuki scene to Tomioka. From this first scene the “death” of the two protagonists of the film is explicitly made clear and the employment of Brechtian alienation effects becomes obvious with the appearance of the kurogo players who are the invisible hand which pushes the two lovers to their destiny of double suicide. Next we see Jihei walk over the Kintaikyô-bridge, the famous arched bridge in Yamaguchi prefecture, where he sees the dead bodies of a couple who had committed suicide. Both the bridge and the dead bodies anticipate the climactic michiyuki scene of the film.

Credit for the simple but bold sets that derived advantage from the low budget must go to Awazu Kiyoshi. Shinoda, who had already used an enlarged picture of a fingerprint in the key scene of his film Shokei no shima (Island of Punishment, 1966), entrusted Awazu with the art direction because of Awazu’s book design for Terayama Shûji’s poem collection Den’en ni shisu (Pastoral: To Die in the Country) in which he had also used illustrations of fingerprints. While he and Shinoda were inspecting the Meguro Studio where the film was shot, Awazu came up with the idea of covering the basic set of a Japanese-style house with enlarged images of cursive syllabary taken from old jûruri texts and reading books. It is not least due to the simple and abstract set design and the use of kurogo that the film succeeds in bringing the condensed passions of the protagonists to the surface. The love scene at the cemetery, one of the few scenes shot on location, is a prime example of the film’s eroticism. In this scene Thanatos does not summon Eros, but the two lovers who are already dead unite in a vital embrace. The rich eroticism of Iwashita Shima is magnificent. The primitive passions of the lovers are enlivened by Takemitsu Tōru’s original and stimulating music score that employs Balinese gamelan, Turkish flutes and drums.

Shinjū ten no Amijima was voted Best Film in the 1969 critic’s poll of the film magazine Kinema Junpô and scooped up quite a lot of other film prizes. The collaboration of Shinoda Masahiro, Tomioka Taeko, Awazu Kiyoshi, Takemitsu Tōru and Iwashita Shima found a continuation in 1986 with Yari no Gonza (Gonza the Spearman), also based on a sewamono by Chikamatsu Monzaemon.

Kimata Kimihiko