

Acropolis Cinema presents



May 24, 2017 ~ 8:30PM ~ Downtown Independent

ABOUT THE FILM

One afternoon, a young woman gets across by bicycle in front of a man pulling a two-wheeled cart. The man named Kosuke avoids the bustle of the city and is living in a mountain lodge. He used to play an active role as a playwright, but lives a quiet life to escape from the past. The bicycle-girl is named Shiori. She works at a café as if nothing has happened, manipulating the café owner with her young and attractive body, while even wearing his estranged wife's clothes. Shiori, with a lot of vital energy and sexual desire, physically involves herself with people around Kosuke one after another. Consequently, Kosuke is also forced to be caught up in a spiral of desire... (Nikkatsu)

77 min // Japan // 2016

Weapon of Flesh: Shiota Akihiko's *Wet Woman in the Wind* and the Return of Roman Porno by Christoph Huber

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It could have been another quiet day in the country, but it wasn't meant to be: Shiota Akihiko's *Wet Woman in the Wind* starts with an idyllic shot of a forest glade dappled with sunlight, the only hint at the absurd convolutions to come being a chair positioned incongruously at the edge of an unpaved crossing. On closer inspection, that chair is surrounded by a tiny pile of debris, slyly anticipating the human flotsam to be observed in the next 77 minutes—starting with formerly respected Tokyo playwright Kosuke (Nagaoka Tasuku), whom failure and excessive sexual promiscuity has driven to the countryside for self-reflection. Coming around the corner, cart in tow, he picks up the chair, to be added to the eclectic collection of items adorning his makeshift isolated country home

Next, reading a book on a pier by the water, Kosuke is distracted by a woman bicycling through the industrial port landscape—and right into the water, her bike toppling over. Unfazed, Shiori (Mamiya Yuki) steps out next to him, casually pulls off her wet T-shirt to wring it out, and strikes up a one-sided conversation, ignoring Kosuke's helpless irritation about this breast-baring intruder: "You live here? I have nowhere to go." At this point—the credits have started running—Kosuke simply tries to walk out on the situation. Too late. "You think you can escape me, but you can't," Shiori says, neatly summing up her purposeful escalation plan for the brief runtime of Shiota's funny and light-hearted but also deeply felt movie, whose motto might be the sentence emblazoned (in English) on the T-shirt Shiori has slipped out of so naturally: "YOU NEED TISSUES FOR YOUR ISSUES." Zhenyuan. Chen's senior medical colleague Guanglin had a lover or close friend named Airen from that town. When she learns that Chen is heading there to find Weiwei, she entrusts him with a mission: to find Airen and give him a cassette tape and a long-ago-purchased shirt.

This is the perfect opening for a film that leads off a reboot of the venerated tradition of Nikkatsu's Roman Porno line, a special strand of sex films the major Japanese studio focused on from 1971 onwards. Television had conquered the Japanese market, and the beleaguered

cinema companies had to branch out, relying on exhibition and real-estate deals. The solution, to bet on comparably cheap and profitable films in the so-called “eroduction” business, proved revelatory. Many commentators claim the invention of Roman Porno saved not only Nikkatsu, but the entire Japanese film industry from imminent disaster. Forty-five years later, the profitability of movies (at least as cinema goods) is ever more in question, while the internet has made access to moving sex imagery of all types not just easier, but basically allows you to enjoy it for free, following any whim. Yet some of the best films in the world are still regularly made by Japanese directors specializing in sex films (for instance, Sato Hisayasu or Zeze Takahisa).

In 1988, Nikkatsu’s Roman Porno line was shut down quickly and unceremoniously, its mode of production made obsolete by the emerging adult home-video market. The end of continuous production, coupled with a few other bad business decisions (including investments in overrated golf courses), led to the prestigious Japanese company filing for bankruptcy in 1993, to be resurrected three years later as a subdivision of electronic games giant Namco—an acquisition exemplifying the still-current state of movies on the radar of popular entertainment in general. Completely restructured, today’s Nikkatsu nevertheless can consider its back catalogue of Roman Porno productions a major asset in the international marketplace, surely boosting their decision to revamp the Roman Porno label for the second time, after a two-shot in 2010.

Clearly a cinephile aware of the Roman Porno tradition, Shiota conceived *Wet Woman in the Wind* as a heartfelt tribute to some of its finest hours, while shaping the material according to personal proclivities... [The film] plays like a Kumashiro [Tatsumi] homage. Shiota channels his predecessor in theme, content and, occasionally, form, but registers bitter insights in a completely different, resolutely upbeat register. Retired artist Kosuke has fled to the countryside like the protagonist of [Kumashiro’s] *Lovers Are Wet*, and is also reminiscent of the self-indulgent rocker in *Oh! Women: A Dirty Song*, which even contains a phone call (during sex) which Shiota mirrors in a tongue-in-cheek reverse angle. Given to intellectual pretensions, not least about himself, Kosuke recedes into his ivory tower while wild wolves howl outside—a reminder of the real world both ominous and funny, as Shiori keeps calling herself a dog, emphasizing the pleasure aspect of (wo)man’s animalistic side. The artist demands “solitude” to “think deeply,” while Shiori keeps re-intruding in ever more comical and excessive ways, until Kosuke has no choice but to relent. To give out more details would mean to spoil some of the film’s finest surprises—often coming via sly juxtapositions with or complications caused by sharply characterized supporting players—not to mention curtailing some of its best gags, all delivered in a fluent yet slightly nervous tone, bolstered by Kida Shunsuke’s percussive jazzy score.

This is quite a surprise from Shiota, who, like classic Roman Porno directors, was first noticed as an assistant, on Kurosawa Kiyoshi’s first (pink) features in 1983 and 1985. At Rikkyo University, where Shiota studied screenwriting under Yamatoya Atsushi (who wrote many Roman Porno scenarios), he met Kurosawa, and together they embarked on 8mm film experiments and were regulars at the film club. “Sam Peckinpah, Robert Aldrich, and Don Siegel were directors that I’d admired as the gods of movies since I was in elementary school,” Shiota told interviewer Johnny Ray Huston. “My respect for them isn’t a result of meeting Kurosawa Kiyoshi and being influenced by him; rather, we became collaborators because we shared a passion for the same type of films.” Apart from Richard Fleischer and Joseph Losey, Shiota also cites Russian Vitaly Kanevsky as an influence on his early work dealing with youthful protagonists, like *Moonlight Whispers* (1999), which rethinks droll manga-style romance through sadomasochistic pleasure, and the tightly controlled alienation study *Harmful Insect* (2002), a major festival breakthrough. After

that, Shiota consciously embarked on bigger commercial fare, including a fantasy action blockbuster drawn from Tezuka Osamu's manga series; *Dororo* (2007) was popular, but the clearly intended sequels never came.

The opportunity to tackle other challenges has clearly come back with *Wet Woman in the Wind*, its adult, always amusing battle of attraction and repulsion played out in ever more hilarious variations, from Kumashiro-like songs through deadpan dialogue (notably with a "totally badass" surfer) or puzzling and curious cuckold interludes to the choreographed chair fight. Of course, this includes ever wilder sex, habitually practiced even while working, phoning, or eating—it becomes the art of life. ("If making delectable coffee is art, then is having delectable sex an art too?" Shiori teases her boss early on, with predictable results.) Meanwhile, the supposed soul-balm of cultured art is profoundly ridiculed via acting advice, especially concerning amateur attempts to stage a Kosuke play, whereas the bad poetry passionately recited by an ordinary workman sees him rewarded with one of the sweetest payoffs in recent cinema. Unlike love, delectable coffee, or delectable sex, false art remains powerless in the face of an escalation process whose punning literalness in the resolution comes off as surprisingly liberating rather than heavy-handed: the director gets fucked (hopefully repeatedly) while awesome sex brings down the (makeshift) house. The wild wolves may still howl outside, but the power of sexuality can set you free. For a moment, that is. ◆



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