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FEMALE PRISONER #701: SCORPION

女囚701号 さそり

Joshu 701-go - sasori

Original release date: 25 August 1972

87 minutes

Directed by **Shunya Ito**

Produced by **Kineo Yoshimine**

Written by **Fumio Konami, Hiro Matsuda**

Based on the comic by **Toru Shinohara**

Director of Photography **Hanjiro Nakazawa**

Lighting by **Yasunojo Kawasaki**

Audio Recording by **Masuihiro Hirogami**

Production Design by **Tadayuki Kuwana**

Music by **Shunsuke Kikuchi**

Edited by **Osamu Tanaka**

Assistant Director **Yutaka Kohira**

Stunt Coordinator **Takashi Hio**

Nami Matsushima / Scorpion **Meiko Kaji**

Detective Sugimi **Isao Natsuyagi**

Warden Goda **Fumio Watanabe**

Rie Shindo **Hiroko Ogi**

Yukiko Kida **Yayoi Watanabe**

Katagiri **Rie Yokoyama**

Masaki **Yoko Mihara**

Otsuka **Akemi Negishi**

Nemoto **Keiko Kuni**

Kitoh **Yumiko Katayama**

Morikawa **Emi Jo**

Imune **Sue Midobe**

Dobashi **Chie Kobayashi**

Tatsuno **Rie Yuki**

Chief guard Okizaki **Hideo Murota**

Yakuza boss Kaizutoshi **Saburo Date**

Furuya (sunglasses guard) **Shinzo Hotta**

Soga (leering guard) **Yoichi Numata**



FEMALE PRISONER SCORPION: JAILHOUSE 41

女囚さそり 第41雑居房

Joshu sasori - dai 41 zakkkyobo

Original release date: 30 December 1972

94 minutes

Directed by **Shunya Ito**

Produced by **Kineo Yoshimine**

Written by **Hiro Matsuda, Fumio Konami, Shunya Ito**

Based on the comic by **Toru Shinohara**

Director of Photography **Masao Shimizu**

Lighting by **Shiro Kuwana**

Audio Recording by **Masuhiro Hirogami**

Production Design by **Tadayuki Kuwana**

Music by **Shunsuke Kikuchi**

Edited by **Osamu Tanaka**

Assistant Director **Shokaku Baba**

Stunt Coordinator **Takashi Hio**

Nami Matsushima / Scorpion **Meiko Kaji**

Warden Goda **Fumio Watanabe**

Prison guard Tsuji **Hosei Komatsu**

Ministry of Justice official **Rokko Taura**

Hide Oba ("killed her children in anger") **Kayoko Shiraishi**

Tomiko Yasuki ("sold herself to several men") **Yukie Kagawa**

Harue Wagatsuma ("poisoned her lover's wife") **Eiko Yanami**

Asako Noda ("set fires out of jealousy") **Hiroko Isayama**

Rose Miyako ("killed her father who tried to violate her") **Kuniko Ishii**

Kimiyo Oikawa ("killed the lover who bullied her son") **Yuki Aresa**

Chief guard Okizaki **Hideo Murota**

Prison guard Tadokoro **Kyoichi Sato**

Prison guard Furuya **Shinzo Hotta**

Old woman **Fudeko Tanaka**



FEMALE PRISONER SCORPION: BEAST STABLE

女囚さそり けもの部屋

Joshu sasori - kemono beya

Original release date: 29 July 1973
87 minutes

Directed by **Shunya Ito**
Produced by **Kineo Yoshimine**
Written by **Hiro Matsuda**
Based on the comic by **Toru Shinohara**
Director of Photography **Masao Shimizu**
Lighting by **Shigeru Umetani**
Audio Recording by **Masuihiro Hirogami**
Production Design by **Tadayuki Kuwana**
Music by **Shunsuke Kikuchi**
Edited by **Osamu Tanaka**
Assistant Director **Shokaku Baba**
Stunt Coordinator **Takashi Hio**

Nami Matsushima / Scorpion **Meiko Kaji**
Detective Gondo **Mikio Narita**
Yakuza boss Sameshima: **Koji Nanbara**
Katsu **Reisen Lee**
Yuki **Yayoi Watanabe**
Yasue **Tomoko Mayama**
Prisoner **Toshie Kimura**
Tanida **Takashi Fujiki**
Adachi **Nobuo Yana**
Shinobu **Mitsuru Mori**
Yamashita **Koji Sekiyama**
Lieutenant Yamazaki **Koji Fujiyama**
Takahashi **Seiya Sato**
Nakagawa **Taro Jin**
Prison Warden **Shinji Takano**
Woman in Nude Studio **Chie Kobayashi**



FEMALE PRISONER SCORPION: #701'S GRUDGE SONG

女囚さそり 701号怨み節

Joshu sasori - 701-go urami-bushi

Original release date: 29 December 1973
88 minutes

Directed by **Yasuharu Hasebe**

Produced by **Kineo Yoshimine**

Written by **Fumio Konami, Hiro Matsuda, Yasuharu Hasebe**

Based on the comic by **Toru Shinohara**

Director of Photography **Hanjiro Nakazawa**

Lighting by **Hideo Motomochi**

Audio Recording by **Yozo Uchida**

Production Design by **Hiromu Kitagawa**

Music by **Hajime Kaburagi**

Edited by **Fumio Soda**

Assistant Director **Yutaka Kohira**

Stunt Coordinator **Takashi Hio**

Nami Matsushima / Scorpion **Meiko Kaji**

Yasuo Kudo **Masakazu Tamura**

Detective Kodama **Toshiyuki Hosokawa**

Akiko Inagaki **Sanae Nakahara**

Midori **Yayoi Watanabe**

Prison Guard Minamimura **Akemi Negishi**

Prison Guard Daimon **Akiko Mori**

Prison Director Nakasone **Kaoru Kusuda**

Tome, Kudo's mother **Kotoe Hatsui**

Kinuyo Kodama **Yumi Kanai**

Detective Hirose **Hiroshi Hijikata**

Detective Takai **Tetsuya Oshita**



VENGEANCE IS HERS

by Chuck Stephens

I don't want to pierce you / but how else will I get free?

Starlessly black, her hair slices across her face: the precipitous part in her ebony tresses like the lip of a desert rock at night, her eye the hunger gleaming beneath it, a hushed huntress frozen in watchful wait for prey. Then, in an instant, she strikes. Her name is Nami Matsushima—"Matsu"—yet legend, carried along on the whispers and screams of the legions of women who come to fear and adore her, has dubbed her Sasori: the scorpion. Why? It's as obvious as it is never explained. She is, like her namesake, a killer always on the run, occasionally cornered but never contained. Like the scorpion, she exists largely underground—in prison cells, piles of rotting wood, labyrinths of sewer pipe, holes burrowed into the earth—at once legendary and, like a movie star, brightly hidden in the dark. And though she exists to sting, it is she who has been stung, by men, again and again. And so she runs.

Known in English to every cinephile and sleaze enthusiast reading these words as the titular *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion*, Sasori has become one of the most famous vengeful forces in the history of world cinema. Born a buxom blonde in the manga of Toru Shinohara in 1970, quickly purchased by Toei Studios and profoundly re-imagined for a series of highly successful films by director Shunya Ito and his star, the sleekly sylphic and seductively hushed Meiko Kaji, Sasori is both a woman bitterly scorned and a ferocious feminist wraith—an escapee from the unjust torments of male oppression and a castrating reaper returned to collect what's due. De flowered and double-crossed by a corrupt detective from the Marihuana Squad as the series begins, Sasori comes of age knowing only betrayal and two modes of existence: incarceration and flight. In her experience, men are but a succession of rapist cops, thug bureaucrats, and sniveling mama's boys: all shining variations on the best that postwar Japanese patriarchy has to offer. The women she encounters—brutal fellow inmates and other emotionally crippled victims of male injustice—are often little better: beaten, spiteful, treacherous, swollen with venom. Sasori is different. She asks for nothing, feels little, says even less. She suffers brutalities in silence. She loves only rarely, and always regrets. She seizes upon injustice in a glance, yet prefers to lie in wait before exacting her one demand: revenge. She is, indeed, that most intoxicating of lethal sirens: a pop song of revenge. A woman's blues, a grudge song—an *urami bushi*—sung in doleful thematic refrain in each of the films in which she appears.

The quartet of films originally derived from Shinohara's manga stand as some of the most artfully conceived and willfully abstract of Toei's already notoriously over-the-top roster of 1970s exploitation classics: director Shunya Ito's inaugural *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion* (*Joshu 701-go - sasori*, 1972) and two increasingly baroque sequels, *Female Prisoner*



Scorpion: Jailhouse 41 (Joshu sasori - dai 41 zakkyobo, 1972) and *Female Prisoner Scorpion: Beast Stable (Joshu sasori - kemono beya, 1973)*, and veteran exploitation master Yasuharu Hasebe's fourth installment, *Female Prisoner Scorpion: #701's Grudge Song (Joshu sasori - 701-go urami bushi, 1973)*, which marked star Meiko Kaji's final appearance in the role. Iconic and irreplaceable, Kaji's manifestation of Sasori both borrows from her earlier roles, particularly the hardboiled babes and their floppy black hats from Hasebe's third and fourth installments of Nikkatsu's *Stray Cat Rock* films (*Nora neko rokku, 1970-71*), and departs from them. Foremost among the changes was the entirely eloquent actress's desire to transform the volubly foul-mouthed Sasori of Shinohara's comic into something far more haunting: she would play the part in virtual silence, ensuring that every flash of her eyes from beneath that long, shimmering black hair would speak louder than words. It was a decision perfectly in keeping with Ito's expressionist vision of Sasori's travails as an empowered all-girl inversion of his former mentor Teruo Ishii's long-running prison series *Abashiri Prison (Abashiri bangaichi, 1965-67)*...by way of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)*. Less a carefully-plotted epic saga of injustices avenged with list-ticking accuracy than a highly discontinuous assortment of ever more outrageous abuses and unflinching retributions, the four films describe a quartet-spanning metamorphosis from Women in Prison genre-bender into absurdist political satire, grand guignol *yakuza-eiga* hyperbole, and sour reverie on the post-traumatic residues of 1960s student radicals. It all climaxes in an apocalyptically Golden Hour gallows vista, where death cheats the hangman and trees drip with the corpses of dead birds. Naturally, Sasori survives.

Yes, Virginia, there are scorpions in Japan. (It's a perfectly reasonable question: I had to look it up, too.) What there aren't, however, are scorpions of any sort in the first four Sasori films: not a single visual instance of their existence, metaphorical or otherwise. Stray dogs and dreadful crows, sure, and Sasori certainly wields a stinger-like blade many times, but there are no scorpions. It's a bit like the hound in Buñuel and Dalí's cine-surrealist ur-text *Un Chien Andalou (1929)*, a beast as boldly articulated in the film's title as it is nonexistent in the film itself. Scorpions were of legendary fascination for the surrealists, of course: Buñuel's *L'âge d'or (1930)* begins as a documentary on the lethal arachnids, and takes its overall structuring principle from the creature's defining tail: five segments plus a stinger. The surrealist scholar Allen S. Weiss¹ has pointed out that, for the purposes of Buñuel's faux documentary, the scorpion is characterized by its "venomousness, aggressiveness, unsociability and hatred of the sun." In discussing the zodiacal aspects of Scorpio in relation to Buñuel's film, Weiss further observes that "the scorpion, governing the genitals and the anus, is the symbol of sex, excrement and death, dweller in shadows and in hell." Our Sasori, raped and re-raped, tormented and shackled in one fecal dungeon after the next, left forever somewhere between dead and alive, knows exactly the characteristics and constellation of horrors of which the

¹ "Between the Sign of the Scorpion and the Sign of the Cross: *L'Âge d'or*" (from Allen S. Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Excess*, SUNY Press, 1989)

professor speaks. When people marvel at the surrealistically heightened reality of the four classic Sasori films—what Ito, who readily cites Buñuel as a key influence, likes to call his "fiction beyond fiction" approach—it is a dimension of the films' design that was carefully calculated all along.

Another thought: although scorpions are arachnids, Sasori is clearly akin to an adjacent species much more familiar to Japanese cinema—the insect woman. Not just to the scrabbling survivor of Shohei Imamura's *The Insect Woman (Nippon konchuki, 1963)*, an innocent farm girl turned hard-bitten escort racket *mamasan*, but to insect women as weird and wildly set-apart as Mothra's twin singing *shobijin*, the deranged entomologist in Kazui Nihonmatsu's *Genocide (aka War of the Insects, Konchu daisenso, 1968)* and the teenaged *gaichu* played by Aoi Miyazaki in Akihiko Shiota's *Harmful Insect (Gaichu, 2001)*. In each of these creations we find women in shocking and often cataclysmic conflict with the society in which they live, where male values of political corruption, environmental despoliation, and sexual predation are the norm, and only violence and destruction seem reasonable responses. Sasori is their sister. She has a grudge to sing.



Shunya Ito's *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion* opens on a coyly nationalist note, with a somber rendition of the Japanese national anthem and an image of the rising Japanese flag. Don't worry, there'll be raping and beating and naked bitches catfighting in a shower room soon enough. A Women in Prison flick so outrageous and unpredictable as to leave you feeling violated and drenched in a shower of your own sweat, *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion* was Ito's first film as a director. He'd joined Toei in 1960, and had spent the previous decade in two capacities there. First, as a reliable assistant director to many of the studio's big names: a time or two with Masahiro Makino and Kinji Fukasaku, and frequently with Teruo Ishii, on whose long-running smash prison series *Abashiri Prison* Ito was employed for several key early installments. And second, as a union representative and labor organizer at the studio, a capacity in which Ito proved both vigorous and politically adept. For his debut, he would fuse the lessons he'd learned on those senior Toei directors' sets with aesthetic expressions of his own left-leaning politics that he'd learned from another master: Nagisa Oshima. Thus the National anthem (playing perversely beneath the crashing waves of the Toei logo) and the rising flag (like the rising curtain on a sexploitation pic); as Oshima had taught a generation of Japanese filmmakers, those were icons best buried, burned, and scorned. Ito, a semi-radicalized aesthete with a passion for European art cinema and its possible Japanese extensions, was an apt pupil. The soul and harmony of beautiful Japan were about to get kicked in the nuts.

Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion begins with Sasori already on the run, struggling through *susuki* grass like a refugee from *Onibaba (1964)*, a young inmate named Yuki in tow, prison guards closing in. Yuki stumbles, gasps. A bright drop of her menstrual blood dots the

grassy floor of the marsh. Sasori reads this sudden onset of Yuki's period as a sign: only *free* women bleed. But it's already too late to work out the metaphor; in a moment, the jackboot of male oppression will be on them again. (Chief among Sasori's captors is Warden Goda, played by Fumio Watanabe, recurrent Oshima leading man and star of *Death By Hanging* [Koshikei, 1968], where he plays a comically flummoxed prison guard whose demeanor Goda occasionally evokes.) This rhythm of capture and release is one that will be sustained across the entire series. In prison, often found in chains on the floor of some dank cement pit, Sasori is assaulted by guards and inmates alike. None of it fazes her. She focuses only on a memory: the virginity she surrendered to the corrupt cop Sugimi (a sneering Isao Natsuyagi), and the way he'd sent her out as a decoy to be gang-raped in a gangland double cross. Botching her first attempt at revenge, Sasori instinctively begins to earn her nickname, crouching in low concealment, waiting for her prey to wander near her lair before striking, stinger poised high and deadly in the air. Sugimi will eventually get his, and Sasori her freedom, but it's the witchy transformation from violated angel to fire-maned Medusa that the never-again-innocent Nami undergoes on the glowing glass floor where she was violated and discarded that really matters. It won't be the last time that Sasori will be revealed as something much more than a scorpion.

Part of the pleasure of *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion* is its grindhouse generosity: it never stops trying to satisfy, with each twist kinkier than the last. As such, we leave a smoldering lesbian seduction, a penalty known as "the Devil's Punishment" which suggests that Sasori might be a cousin of Kobo Abe's *Woman in the Dunes* (*Suna no onna*), a prison riot under a blood red sky led by Akemi Negishi (star of Josef von Sternberg's *Anatohan* [1953]), and an incidence of *strappado* straight out of a 19th century Yoshitoshi print for you to discover on your own. Photographed by Hanjiro Nakazawa, master cinematographer behind Fukasaku's *Graveyard of Honor* (*Jingi no hakaba*, 1975) and many others, the film is visually startling throughout, from its precise control of color in particular down to the painstaking production design of Tadayuki Kuwana. Two examples, one slamming directly into the other: first, the film's obligatory yet genre-warping shower room catfight scene. Lit in a palette of frozen blues (in unspoken concord with the water on the set, which was ice cold) and surrounded by two-dozen naked women, Sasori and Masaki (Yoko Mihara)—a cellblock nemesis who has just been transformed into a crypto-kabuki harridan in a fit of greasepaint rage—face off. A single note of sanguinary red punctuates the monster-movie grey of the images: the firehouse-crimson mandala of a water faucet handle. After a brief skirmish, Sasori baits Masaki into plunging a shard of glass into the Warden's eye, which immediately festers into a rhyming knob of pulpy red, radiant against both the flush of the outraged Warden's face and the police state blue of his uniform. Slam: a cut to the mutilated Warden's retaliation. In extreme long shot we behold a vast stone quarry where the inmates have been put to hard labor, spaced well apart across the barren gravel floor of the pit, digging holes in the earth with shovels. In their quasi-tie-dyed prison smocks, they look for a moment like sprigs of lavender pushing improbably up through brown and barren soil. It's a visage of unexpected and breathtaking

beauty. But again, don't worry: the tits and the beatings and the entirely entertaining sadism will all resume soon enough.



The snap and twang of a bawling *shamisen* sounds the beginning of a descent into madness as *Female Prisoner Scorpion: Jailhouse 41* unfurls, the camera spiraling ever downward through rough-hewn prison corridors that glisten in the blackness. From somewhere deep within, a scraping sound surfaces: it is Sasori, once again shackled on the stones of an unlit dungeon, fixed on a mission. In her teeth, a stolen spoon, slowly being sharpened to a lethal point as she drags it repeatedly across the stones. In her eyes, the white-hot glint of death. The unexpected success of *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion* had charged emerging director Shunya Ito with purpose (and won him a Best Newcomer award from the Japan Directors Guild), just as it had given 25-year-old Meiko Kaji her defining role. Kaji had signed with Nikkatsu under the name Masako Ota in 1965, at the age of 18, and played numerous small parts under a variety of directors including Yasuharu Hasebe before attracting attention in Teruo Ishii's *Blind Woman's Curse* (*Kaidan nobori ryu*, 1970); the *Stray Cat Rock* films which made her famous quickly followed. When she switched studios in 1971, her first films for Toei were a pair of *Wandering Ginza Butterfly* pool parlor action-comedies (*Gincho wataridori* & *Gincho nagaremono*, both 1972) half-cadged from Robert Rossen's *The Hustler* (1961). Ito had hated them, and thought Kaji all wrong for Sasori when she was originally suggested. Fate intervened: after the first *Female Prisoner #701* film, no one else *but* the sleekly beautiful and lethally silent Kaji could possibly fill Sasori's sandals.

In every way a much blacker film than its predecessor, the delirious and ever more inexplicable *Jailhouse 41* retained much of the first film's crew, with one notable exception: cinematographer Masao Shimizu, who helped tip the new film completely over into inky noir expressionism. After a reprise of *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion*'s Oshima-inflected opening, this time reuniting Fumio Watanabe with his frequent Oshima co-stars Rokko Taura and Hosei Komatsu for a series of cartoon-like Japanese-authority-as-Keystone-Kops tableaux, *Jailhouse 41* settles into a very dark, and now rather more allegorical, groove. In a new, rockier quarry, Sasori is crucified against the branches of an uprooted tree and once again gang-raped, this time by prison guards masked by fishnet stockings and wearing shit brown *serapes*. On the soundtrack, painfully distorted cries are throttled from an electric guitar and a Jews' harp thrums: the scent of *Django* (1966) is heavy in the air.

Sasori stares up at her tormentors—the rapists, her spiteful fellow inmates, and the one-eyed Warden Goda up above—as if from deep within her grave. Soon enough, the tables are turned and Sasori and a sordid half-dozen of her prison sisters are on the run. In their wake, perhaps the second most extraordinary castration in the history of Japanese cinema: suffice to say, Sasori remembered that tree. Across desiccated lava beds and dunes of black sand the insect women scurry, holing up in the ruin of an ash-smothered village. There, their long-captive

energies begin to emerge in a series of complexly lit fever-dream compositions and nightmare scenarios. Over the flames of a stray dog roast, the women listen in horror as Sasori's new nemesis, snarling inmate Oba (played with a series of death-defying rolls of the eyes by underground theater actress Kayako Shirashi), recounts the night she stabbed the baby she still carried in her womb. The wind, the synthesizers, and the sound effects crew all come to life, and the first of the film's truly phantasmagorical episodes erupts with the arrival of a chanting crone—the vestige of another sort of *bushi*, the women's blues known as the *Ballad of Narayama* (*Narayama bushi-ko*), that legendary tale of withered grannies left to die in the snow by families too poor of substance or soul to sustain them. This too, Sasori sees, must be avenged, and for a moment, in a cyclone of autumn leaves, the hag and the scorpion become one. Witch, avenger, all-purpose feminist fury—Sasori is Woman, and silence is her roar.

In *Jailhouse 41*, the stories of Sasori and the women she, for better or worse, runs with, become specifically the stuff of song. Not just the always-riveting series theme song, *Urami Bushi* (“grudge song”), credited to Ito and composer Shunsuke Kikuchi and sung to chilling perfection by Kaji, or the buoyant and vibes-driven *Onna no Jumon* (“woman’s incantation”), another Kaji hit heard repeatedly throughout the film during episodes of flight. *Jailhouse 41* is in fact filled with *bushi*: songs in which the women are explained and memorialized, and songs that allow them to vent their basest longings and sound their foulest hatreds. Songs of cruelty, psychosis, rage. *Jailhouse 41* may be the most punishing film of the quartet. It throbs with madness. Innocence is slaughtered, hostages molested and murdered. Women are snared and assaulted in fishermen’s nets. A bus splits wide open. So will your mind. Everyone dies...until they don’t. Will Sasori and her sorority come to a rotten end on a reeking mountain of garbage? Who are we kidding? *Female Prisoner Scorpion: Jailhouse 41* is a pitch black sing-a-long of success, and a sprint to freedom for Team Sasori—even if the sound of a scorpion laughing may just be the most terrifying song of all.



It may seem unusual to call a film filled with hookers turning tricks in graveyards and a sister making passionate love to her brain-damaged brother *fun*, but there you have it. *Female Prisoner Scorpion: Beast Stable* is fun...of a very sick and special sort. Part of what powers the mirth is the way that, by this third and still enormously popular outing in the series, director Shunya Ito, star Meiko Kaji, and crew had accepted their sudden and welcome success, and were already having fun toying with the iconography they’d established. Yes, Sasori is still very much the underground-dwelling scorpion, but where *Jailhouse 41* began by burrowing deeper into the darkness, *Beast Stable* heads for the surface, through subway train tunnels superimposed with endlessly unfolding corridors of “Wanted: Nami Matsushima” posters, strung out in succession like hoardings plastered with adverts for the latest film. The meaning is clear: Sasori is a star. But once she reaches daylight, handcuffed to a cop’s severed arm (what is she, the dog from *Yojimbo* [1961]?), she finds the sunlight blacker than night. Again

photographed in a spectrum of shadow-rich blacks by Masao Shimizu (who would move on to shoot Norifumi Suzuki’s nunsploitation masterpiece *School of the Holy Beast* [Seiju gakuen, 1974] the following year). *Beast Stable* at times evokes Seijun Suzuki’s *Gate of Flesh* (*Nikutai no mon*, 1964) in its vision of hookers in Hell. Fire is a major motif throughout. Streetwalkers even offer to show off their merchandise by the glow of tiny flames.

While the now one-armed cop Gondo (veteran tough guy Mikio Narita, his rug squarer than ever) prowls the streets in search of Sasori, she is laying low. She’s taken a day job as a seamstress (very insect woman indeed), and entered into an uncertain allegiance with a hooker named Yuki, who’s pregnant by the severely handicapped brother she keeps locked up at home. (Is this another Yuki? The same? Does it matter?) In short order both Yuki and Sasori run afoul of a local *yakuza-gumi* run by Sameshima (granite-faced Koji Nanbara) and his fabulously fashion-damaged partner-in-crime Katsu, played beneath a frosting of vampire lip gloss by underground stage great Reisen Lee (who’d later turn up in Paul Schrader’s *Mishima* [1985].) Lee rages and poses and strikes *mie* (those rigidly contorted faces kabuki actors use to momentarily freeze the action) so ferociously it’s as if she’d seen drag queen Akihiro Maruyama in Kinji Fukasaku’s *Black Lizard* (*Kurotokage*, 1968) so many times she’d gone completely off her lid. She’s also quite nasty with a driving iron. And she keeps crows, a whole murder of them, in a closet-sized cage in the middle of the clan’s office suite; when they caw it sounds like an electronic cat vomiting. Armed with a stinger as sharp as any of Sasori’s, the man-woman Katsu is the greatest foe our heroine will ever face: the greatness of Lee’s outrageous performance, filled with feathers and enormous teeth and divine outrage, and the great extremities of her character, from sadistic psycho gang boss to shockheaded prison shrew. Lady Macbeth, Mother Gin Sling, Bride of Frankenstein, Dr. Frank-N-Furter—y’all got nothing on Reisen Lee.

D.W. Griffith may not have had the matched pair of abortions at the heart of *Beast Stable* in mind when he was inventing the synchronies of parallel editing, but then little did Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí ever imagine their most famous co-creation—*Un Chien Andalou*’s notorious image of a razor slicing through the nucleus of an incongruously serene woman’s eye—would decades later resurface as a touching moment of feminist connection at the epicenter of a Japanese Pinky Violence film. And yet, here we are. The thoroughly interpolated surrealism that percolates through the Sasori quartet at last bubbles clearly to the surface as Matsui, in sympathy with a bargirl whose back alley abortion has just proven fatal, passes the blade of a purloined scalpel in front of her eye, producing not the shock of enucleation but a single teardrop. There are stranger things to come. Production designer Kuwana outdoes himself for the film’s penultimate episode, set in a labyrinthine sewer network so bleak and beautiful it might have come from one of Fritz Lang’s Hollywood crime operas. And consider for a moment the title of the film: *Beast Stable*. A reference to those crows, and the bumbling *yakuza* they represent? Or to the incestuous family that Yuki, who lives in something rather like a manger and refers to herself as a beast (*kedamono*), contemplates forming with her brother and the child they have on the way? Or perhaps *Beast Stable* describes the entire world in which

Sasori exists: a menagerie so twisted and befouled that the scorpion seems the gentlest of creatures under the sun.



We've seen Sasori through plenty of outrages, but *Female Prisoner Scorpion: #701's Grudge Song* begins with a humiliation we never thought our heroine would face: sprawled on her back in a chapel, her bell bottoms covered in frosted chunks of wedding cake. Sasori in love? A newer, kinder, domesticated scorpion? Perhaps, but not for long...

Whether out of restlessness as a young director eager to prove his versatility, dissatisfaction over Toei's failure to continue properly financing the increasingly adventurous sequels, or labor disputes at the studio which drew him back to his organizing roots at a crucial moment, director Shunya Ito's departure from the Sasori series after *Beast Stable* sent the scorpion's saga in new directions, stylistically and otherwise. It also marked the beginning of the end for Meiko Kaji, who determined to stay onboard for a fourth and final installment largely out of allegiance to her old collaborator Yasuharu Hasebe, who stepped in to direct *Female Prisoner Scorpion: #701's Grudge Song*. There were other changes of personnel as well: cinematographer Hanjiro Nakazawa returned to replace (and sustain the lush blacknesses of) Masao Shimizu, and composer Shunsuke Kikuchi (who would write music for everything from *Goke*, *Body Snatcher from Hell* [*Kyuketsuki gokemidoro*, 1968] to *Dragon Ball Z*) moved on as funky stinger-master Hajime Kaburagi (*Tokyo Drifter* [*Tokyo nagaremono*, 1966]) took over the charts. An angry screed centered on Matsu's passing affection for Kudo (Masakazu Tamura, son of legendary screen actor Tsumasaburo Bando), a former *zengakuren* student anarchist who was sexually mutilated by police interrogators at the end of the 1960s, *#701's Grudge Song* may be the bleakest film of the quartet. It jettisons the comic-Oshima political satire of the earlier entries in favor of a much more painful confrontation with the past. Hope, trust, affection, rebirth? Not a chance. This is the film that kills the last traces of Matsu's humanity, just as it ensures the ruthless, remorseless Sasori's spiritual immortality. As such, it's not just the last great Sasori flick—it's a startling example of Hasebe's penchant throughout his 70s films (*Rape!* [*Okasu!*, 1976], *Rape! 13th Hour* [*Reipu 25-ji - bokan*, 1977], *Raping!* [*Yaru!*, 1978]) for stomping down hard on the sustain pedal of human suffering, and never letting up.

Tea kettles play important roles in these last two Sasori films, so much so that a student of Yasujiro Ozu might even find an echo of the master's great hooker flick *Woman of Tokyo* (*Tokyo no onna*, 1933)—where a nondescript tea pot takes on extraordinary emotional resonance—in *Beast Stable*, where a pimp's old lady spends several long moments waiting for water to boil so that she might scald her faithless man. The tea kettle in *#701's Grudge Song* is twice as menacing and just as central to the plot: with it, zombie-faced cop Kodama (Toshiyuki Hosokawa, star of Yoshishige Yoshida's *Eros Plus Massacre* [*Erosu purasu gyakusatsu*, 1969]) will torture and disfigure Kudo in a way that all-too-painfully fuses political and sexual repression. Sasori does not make tea, even if this is her most passive and subdued incarnation

yet. Most startling of all, Sasori eventually makes love with Kudo, not in shackles or at knifepoint, but tenderly, cautiously, the passion that spills from her loins during their union still as bloodstain red as the *Hi-no-maru* of the Japanese flag. Look again at her "o face", the way her hair is splayed out like rays from a jet black sun: an echo of that moment of possession and transformation when first she was raped, back in *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion*. Think again of the scene that precedes this passionate union of two hideously scarred souls, where Sasori sits dispassionately by while Kudo kidnaps Kodama's pregnant wife and causes her to plummet to her death. Motherhood is not a condition treated kindly by the anti-lullaby that is *#701's Grudge Song*, but then neither is radical action, which—like scorpion foreplay—can prove to be an altogether fucked-up thing.

Returning finally to the series' Women in Prison film roots, and providing a double apotheosis to the "death by hanging" motif that has haunted it all along, *#701's Grudge Song* remands Sasori again to custody, only to discover that she may be more of a threat to the spiritual fiber of humanity inside than out. Back inside the big house, Sasori is this time surrounded by female prison guards, a shift that obliterates any distinctions between keeper and kept once and for all: one of the guards is even played by Akemi Negishi, formerly an inmate-nemesis in the series' debut. Everything stands on its head. Sasori, (absurdly) tasked with providing emotional strength to a spiritually reformed fellow inmate (played by Sanae Nakahara, Kinji Fukasaku's wife) on the eve of her execution, instead infests the woman's mind with existential terrors that spread like madness on a breeze throughout the rest of the prison and the remainder of the film. "Good" guards get raped. Sasori runs free. Day is exsanguinated into night. The ending is something beyond reason, beyond expressionism, beyond apocalyptic. Fiction beyond fiction.

Director Shunya Ito took his time in returning to filmmaking after the third Sasori film, following up with the supernatural thriller *Curse of the Dog-God* (*Inugami no tatarai*) in 1977, and making movies only sporadically ever since. His fate seems to have been in some ways extra-filmic: it wasn't so much the quality of the subsequent movies he made that attracted attention (increasingly Ito stuck to award-bait topics and stayed clear of the masterfully sleazoid style of his debut), but the stirs they caused beyond the box office. Thus his 1985 film *Grey Sunset* (*Hana ichimonme*) is remembered less as a Japanese Academy Award-winning study of the decline of an Alzheimer's victim, and more as a domestic moneymaker that, due to its mainstream success, "kept Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* from being nominated for an Oscar." Similarly, his 1998 *Pride* (*Puraido - unmei no toki*) is mainly remembered for the international waves made by its ill-advised attempt to rehabilitate of the reputation of Japanese Prime Minister/war criminal Hideki Tojo. Sasori, however, continued to live on—if never again with Meiko Kaji in the long black trench coat and sinister black hat. Various sequels and remakes have appeared, but once Kaji had departed, the venom seemed altogether drained. After Sasori, the actress quickly moved on to another of her defining roles, as the equally vengeful *Lady Snowblood* (*Shurayukihime*, 1973). And yet some things never change. The first word Kaji would speak in her new capacity: "*Urami*"—still holding that grudge!

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GRUDGE SONG: AN INTERVIEW WITH MEIKO KAJI (1997)

by Chris D.

I have to admit I was a little shocked when Meiko Kaji walked in the room. I had expected her to be well-educated and intelligent, and had had an intuition that she was going to be outspoken. But I had not been quite prepared for her charismatic presence. It had been almost a quarter century since Ms. Kaji's genre film prime, but it seemed as if we had entered some kind of time warp. Clad in a conservative, elegant pants suit, Ms. Kaji seemed to have aged only a few years. She was brimming with the youthful exuberance, grace and beauty of her *Lady Snowblood* days. No doubt Ms. Kaji's enthusiasm, lack of cynicism, and impatience with mediocrity is what has kept her so refreshingly vital.

Meiko Kaji started at Nikkatsu studios in 1965 as Masako Ota. I have seen only a couple of her early appearances in such films as *A Man's Crest - Wanderer's Code* (*Otoko no monsho - ruten no okite*, 1965) and *Women's Police* (*Onna no keisatsu*, 1969) and she has little to do in either one. Yasuharu Hasebe's *Retaliation* (*Shima wa moratta*) from 1968 was a step in the right direction for her, though, with a decent part as yakuza Akira Kobayashi's girlfriend. Still in her teens, she has a fearless quality about her that shines through, right up until her death scene when she perishes in a drive-by meant for her beau.

Her one and only top-billed role as Masako Ota was in the girl gang exploitation programmer, *Mini-Skirt Lynchers* (*Zankoku onna rinchi*, 1969), alongside Annu Mari (the exotic *femme fatale* fresh from Seijun Suzuki's *Branded To Kill* (*Koroshi no rakuin*, 1967). Another sought-after picture that has remained elusive, from all reports it's a precursor to the girl gang pictures that proliferated on Japanese movie screens in the 1970's.

Masako Ota finally became Meiko Kaji in 1969, and one of her better films from that transformative year is the *ninkyō* yakuza film, *Chivalrous Flower's Life Story - Gambling Heir* (*Kyōka retsuden - shumei tobaku*, 1969), directed by Keiichi Ozawa. Top-billed alongside Hideki Takahashi, Chieko Matsubara portrays a girl who becomes *oyabun* of her father's gang after his death. But co-stars Kaji and Tatsuya Fuji had by far the more interesting roles with Kaji playing outcast Fuji's tattooed and knife-wielding card-sharp lover. The same year, Kaji also appeared in a contemporary gangster picture called *The Clean Up* (*Arashi no yushatachi*), an all-star bash featuring not only Nikkatsu top draws like Yujiro Ishihara, Joe Shishido and Tetsuya Watari but also Toho's Mie Hama.

But the impetus for the name change itself came from Kaji's mentor Masahiro Makino, who directed the actress in his *Tale Of The Last Japanese Yakuza* (*Nihon zankyo-den*, 1969), which remains one of the veteran filmmaker's best *ninkyō* yakuza pictures, matching his



efforts at Toei studios in the *Brutal Tales of Chivalry (Showa zankyo-den, 1965-72)* series. Unfortunately, Kaji's part is quite small.

Which brings us to Kaji's first top-billed role under her new name. Director Teruo Ishii's *Blind Woman's Curse (Kaidan nobori ryu)* from 1970 was meant to be the third and concluding film in star Hiroko Ogi's *Rising Dragon (Nobori ryu, 1969-70)* *ninkyo yakuza* series. But Ogi did not appear onscreen, instead making way for Kaji as a benevolent gang boss tormented by a vengeful woman (Hoki Tokuda) she had blinded in a swordfight. Kaji had also killed her brother, so there's a hefty score to settle. Tokuda, now a knife-thrower in a traveling erotic/grotesque horror carnival and abetted by a demented hunchback (played by the wild *butoh* dance pioneer Tatsumi Hijikata from Ishii's *Horrors Of Malformed Men (Edogawa Ranpo zenshu - kyofu kikei ningen, 1969)*), hooks up with a villainous gang boss (Toru Abe), a man who has his own reasons for wanting Kaji and her gang out of the way. A bizarre amalgam of both *kaidan* and *ninkyo* elements, *Blind Woman's Curse* is never less than entertaining and, in some moments, such as the phantasmagorical final swordfight between Kaji and Tokuda, it is catapulted into heady heights.

Later that same year, a fortuitous chain of events led Kaji to be cast in the first of a new series about delinquent teenagers, the *Stray Cat Rock (Nora neko rokku, 1970-71)* films. Initially intended as a promotional vehicle for hugely popular singer Akiko Wada, top-billed in the initial outing, it wasn't long before co-stars Meiko Kaji and Tatsuya Fuji took center stage. In *Delinquent Girl Boss (Onna bancho - nora neko rokku, 1970)*, Wada is a motorcycle-driving rebel who helps buckskin-clad Kaji and her girls in a fight with rival female hoods. The area is also plagued with a fascist yakuza bunch, The Black Shirt Corps, and Kaji's beau (Koji Wada) wants admittance. When he bungles a bid to fix a fight near the end, he's fatally shot, and Kaji and Akiko Wada go on a revenge-binge that leads to Kaji's death as well as that of the lead villain. Although a bit convoluted and chaotic, the film still vibrates with an infectious energy. Toshiya Fujita directed the follow-up, *Wild Jumbo (Wairudo janbo, 1970)*, a disjointed mix of heist thriller and goofy teen antics with delinquents robbing funds from a religious cult. Director Fujita redeems the picture at the close as the teenagers are cut down by their ruthless pursuers. Especially memorable is Kaji's death in a river at the downbeat climax. The best *Stray Cat Rock* film came next with *Sex Hunter (Sekkusū hanta, 1970)*, with director Hasebe putting Kaji through her paces as the stylish, whip-wielding leader of a girl gang. Kaji has her conscience awakened when her impotent biker beau, The Baron (Tatsuya Fuji), orders his gang not only to persecute teens of mixed-race parentage, but also shanghai's Kaji's girls as sex slaves for foreign businessmen. A triangle takes shape when Kaji falls for a half-breed stud (Riki Yasuoka), and the saga builds to a bloody, tragic ending. In the fourth film, *Machine Animal (Mashin animaru, 1971)*, also directed by Hasebe, Kaji plays a gang girl who is chased after stealing 500 doses of LSD from the bad guys, one of whom is a U.S. Army deserter. The concluding *Stray Cat* movie, *Beat '71 (Boso shudan '71, 1971)*, put Fujita once again at the helm, directing Yoshio Harada as the leader of a gang of hippie boys trying to get back one of their own who has been kidnapped by his rich father. The boy returns and rejoins his girl

(Kaji), but both are killed in the crossfire between his bunch and his dad's hoodlum henchmen.

1971 also saw the transformation of Kaji's home studio, Nikkatsu, from mainstream movie company to *roman porno* factory. Not to Kaji's taste, she decided to accept an offer from Toei, a studio already churning out plenty of female action pictures. Kaji's first film there was 1972's *Wandering Ginza Butterfly (Gincho wataridori)*, directed by Kazuhiko Yamaguchi, who also helmed the majority of Etsuko 'Sue' Shiomi's *Sister Streetfighter (Onna hissatsu ken, 1974-76)* films. Kaji, an ex-con whose girl gang had killed a mobster, meets a lone wolf dandy (Tsunehiko Watase) at her uncle's billiard parlor and, through him, soon has a job at mama-san Akiko Koyama's hostess bar. The last third of the film has billiard expert Kaji playing against villainous boss Koji Nanbara's junkie champion (Matasaburo Tanba) for the deed to Koyama's club. When the villains win by cheating, then murder Kaji's friend (Tatsuo Umemiya) who intervenes, Kaji and Watase head over to Nanbara's HQ with swords to slaughter the mob. Despite meager production values, the picture's an unpretentious, entertaining vehicle, putting a unique spin on its programmer elements. It's too bad the same can't be said for the sequel, *Wandering Ginza Butterfly - She-Cat Gambler (Gincho nagaremono - mesuneko bakuchi, 1972)*, where, despite the presence of co-star Sonny Chiba, the film dissolves too often into silly comedy before its violent conclusion.

Kaji's outings in her first mega-popular movie series were born the same year. The *Female Prisoner Scorpion (Joshū sasori, 1972-73)* films, adapted from a women's prison *manga* by Toru Shinohara, possess traditional exploitation traits but with a surreal and comic book-like use of color and mythical, archetypal images. Kaji portrays Nami Matsushima, nicknamed "Sasori" (Scorpion), an unjustly-convicted woman and fanatical avenger raining down wrath upon various evil males. As portrayed by Kaji, Scorpion is mysteriously elemental, a virtually silent, deadly force uttering only a few cryptic sentences in each picture. All four of the films are quite good, but the second, *Jailhouse 41 (Dai 41 zakkyobo, 1972)* and *Beast Stable (Kemono beya, 1973)* are phenomenal. *Jailhouse 41* follows Kaji and six other, even more hardened inmates as they break out of stir. They cross a desolate, blasted landscape—a ghost village half-buried in volcanic ash, melancholic autumnal woods and barren mountains of stone—all the time retaliating against the guards who pursue them, and bestial, vacationing salarymen who make various attempts to assault the women. It's a transcendental, exhilarating masterpiece that is at times reminiscent of John Boorman's *Point Blank* (1967) and Donald Cammell & Nicolas Roeg's *Performance* (1970) in its sheer audacity. *Beast Stable* finds Scorpion once again on the lam, nearly captured when handcuffed to a nutcase cop (Mikio Narita), but then eluding him when she jumps off the subway, severing Narita's arm in the process. Kaji is soon abducted by a perverse gang boss (Koji Nanbara) and his mistress (Reisen Lee), a grudge-holding, black feathers-wearing foe from prison, who cages our anti-heroine in a cell full of vicious ravens. Needless to say, Kaji escapes, hiding out in underground storm drains until she can return to wreak vengeance on her tormentors. Eventually captured, the film concludes when she causes gloating cop Narita to be strangled through the bars of a cell door. The final Kaji *Scorpion* picture, *#701's Grudge Song (701-go urami bushi, 1973)*, follows Scorpion as

she falls in love with a crippled, henpecked former student radical (Masakazu Tamura). Kaji's Scorpion briefly finds happiness, but her dreams of normalcy are dashed when a fascist cop (Toshiyuki Hosokawa) uses the weak-willed boy's mom to pressure him into revealing her whereabouts. Kaji kills the betrayer, and at the sunset climax, lynches the evil Hosokawa on the very scaffold on which she was to be executed the following morning.

Right after the second *Female Prisoner Scorpion* film, Kaji signed on as the lead in *Lady Snowblood* (*Shurayuki hime*, 1973) and its sequel, *Lady Snowblood - Love Song Of Vengeance* (*Shurayuki hime - urami renga*, 1974), which were shot at Toho during a hiatus from her Toei obligations. Both were directed by *Stray Cat Rock's* Toshiya Fujita and adapted from a *manga* by Kazuo Koike, creator of *Lone Wolf And Cub* (*Kozure okami*, 1970-76) and *The Razor* (*Goyokiba*, 1970-76). Set at the turn of the century, Kaji plays Yuki, an orphan trained by a priest in swordfighting so that she can avenge her parents' murder by violent con men. Aided by a leftist writer (Toshio Kurosawa), Kaji tracks down, then kills each of the murderers. But the last villain (Eiji Okada) has changed his identity and is now a powerful right-wing fanatic wreaking havoc within the government. Kurosawa dies and the severely-wounded Kaji stumbles away in the falling snow after they dispatch Okada at a masked ball at his mansion. The second film is even more overtly political with Kaji caught after killing scores of police, then shanghaied by a nationalist bunch, led by Shin Kishida, who coerce her into becoming their assassin. They plant her as a maid in the house of a communist writer (played by director Juzo Itami), but she grows to like him and refuses to help in his betrayal. When the fanatics kidnap Itami, Kaji manages to escape, but Itami is tortured. Kaji then finds refuge with Itami's estranged brother (Yoshio Harada), a cynical doctor who now resides in the ghetto. The fascists, in collusion with the police, release the dying writer on the edge of the slum, and he finds his way to Harada. But the authorities have infected Itami with plague in a grotesque experiment which they hope will eradicate undesirables from the impoverished area. Once the writer dies, the now-infected Harada helps Kaji attack and kill Kishida and his cohorts. Both *Snowblood* films veer between quietly majestic beauty and blood-drenched *grand guignol*, achieving a strangely radiant, nihilistic poetry.

Kaji also appeared in three of director Kinji Fukasaku's films during the seventies, most notably *Yakuza Burial - Jasmine Flower* (*Yakuza no hakaba - kuchinashi no hana*, 1976) as the anguished Korean wife of an imprisoned gang boss, a woman who finally finds love with an alienated, loner cop (Tetsuya Watari). Once more, happiness is not in the cards as Watari's character is doomed by his innate hatred of hypocrisy on whichever side of the law he finds it.

Kaji's favorite of her films is *The Love Suicides At Sonezaki* (*Sonezaki shinju*, 1978), a densely-written adaptation of a Monzaemon Chikamatsu play that has been filmed several times. Kaji is awe-inspiring in the role of an indentured courtesan who escapes with her young merchant lover for a few last days of freedom. Director Yasuzo Masumura chronicles the pair's final hours together with simplicity and a surgical skill for unearthing long-buried emotions.

Since the eighties, Kaji has worked continuously, but mostly in television. She remains an opinionated, fearless champion of women in the entertainment industry. Most recently, Quentin Tarantino used two of her most famous songs, "*Flower of Carnage* (*Shura No Hana*)" from *Lady Snowblood* and "*Grudge Song* (*Urami Bushi*)" from the *Female Prisoner Scorpion* series, in the concluding duel and end credits respectively of *Kill Bill*, Vol. 1.

The following interview took place at the offices of Creative Enterprises International in Tokyo in October, 1997. Shoko Ishiyama translated onsite. Ms. Kaneda, Ms. Kaji's longtime friend and manager, was also present. Ai Aota helped with some clarification and translated small portions not originally translated. This interview was originally published in Chris D.'s book Outlaw Masters of Japanese Cinema, and we are grateful to Alice Orton and IB Tauris for granting this reprint.

Q: I have heard that you had a pop music career before you entered film?

A: Not before the films. It was common back then, especially at Nikkatsu, for performers to sing the theme songs for the films they were in. It doesn't mean that I was really active as a pop singer. I've made about seven or eight albums. When I was at Toei later on, a couple of the songs were successful and one sold a million copies, so some people thought I'd had a pop music career when I was making films at Nikkatsu because I'd done some theme songs.

Q: The successful song was "*Grudge Song* (*Urami Bushi*)" from *Female Prisoner Scorpion*?

A: (laughs) Yes.

Q: Working at Nikkatsu, what was the catalyst for you going from more of a regular supporting actress to an action star?

A: Of all the movie companies, Nikkatsu had the image of the actress as a young girl, like Sayuri Yoshinaga, who had this "girlie" kind of character. I was tending to get cast as strong women, and the company steered me to continue with that kind of role. It was a company policy to make an actress into her own image, to aim in the direction each actress seemed to naturally be heading. I was not very confident as a female of being able to do violent action films. But I tried my best to do what was required of me in the role. Back then, too, there was a kind of understood agreement amongst the five major movie companies, Toei, Nikkatsu, Daiei, Shochiku and Toho, about using other company's performers without permission. All the older actors and actresses generally had five year contracts that were exclusive to that company. I was in a situation in the beginning of having to work only for Nikkatsu. I would have to take whatever role I was offered, fit into whatever mold they put me in. I was well received as an "outlaw" character, and that was why I appeared again and again in that type of film. It was an unwritten rule at these companies until about 1975 or so. I was in the last generation that

really had to go through being pigeonholed into a certain type of role.

Q: Was *Chivalrous Flower's Life Story - Gambling Heir* the first yakuza action film you did where you actually did some of the knife and sword fighting?

A: That was the year I changed my name from Masako Ota to Meiko Kaji, at the behest of respected director Masahiro Makino. Mr. Makino had been instrumental in developing the *ninkyō* yakuza film at Toei. Before the films in 1969, I was pretty much relegated to playing a high school or college student. These were the first films where I had larger roles and also often had to do the sword fighting at the same time. It was difficult at first because it was so new to me. Of course, I ended up learning how to do it. But it's very hard work to master the sword forms, you really have to know traditional Japanese dance to master the postures, to work out the balance and choreography. I had to train for a long time.

Q: How did Masahiro Makino become involved in *Tale Of The Last Japanese Yakuza*? Makino also directed several films at Daiei, a couple with Shintaro Katsu. Since Mr. Makino was one of Toei's top directors, how did he end up directing at Nikkatsu and Daiei?

A: Actors and actresses were the ones who really were subject to the exclusivity policy. Directors didn't have that much trouble making films at other studios. Also Mr. Makino was a respected top director, so he certainly had the ability to go and work where he wanted.

Q: *Blind Woman's Curse* was a continuation of the *Rising Dragon* series starring Hiroko Ogi. Since she didn't appear in *Blind Woman's Curse*, were you supposed to be replacing her?

A: I wasn't really intended as a replacement. Hiroko Ogi had another *ninkyō* series of her own, too, at the time. My lead role in *Blind Woman's Curse* was a gift from the company to congratulate me on my new star status, my name change.

Q: Whose idea was it to make *Blind Woman's Curse* as a *ninkyō* ghost story?

A: I guess it was the first original *ninkyō* yakuza ghost story! But I think the major thrust of the story was the *ninkyō* side of it, the revenge for the boss. You have to remember that a term like *kaidan* in a movie title is always there to appeal more to the mass audience as a kind of PR gimmick.

Q: There *were* many horror elements, maybe not in the form of a ghost story, but there were macabre images. Was that more director Teruo Ishii's input or the studio's?

A: Probably more the interest of Mr. Ishii himself. I don't remember that much of the horror-

type imagery. One thing I vividly recall during one of the swordfights, the black cat was supposed to be jumping towards me from behind, and the cat's claws were not trimmed. It scratched me badly, and I still have the scars to this day. So that was sort of a real horror story for me personally. I think it was more of a *ninkyō* picture. One thing that happened a lot with Japanese movies back then was to integrate sensational images or catch-phrases into the movie titles to draw people into the theaters. For example the *Sex Hunter* entry in the *Stray Cat Rock* series; you get more of a social consciousness at work dealing with the persecution of the mixed-race teenagers. But then you have the movie called *Sex Hunter!* You used to get that a lot. I'm really convinced that was one of the reasons they used the word *kaidan* in the Japanese title of *Blind Woman's Curse*.

Q: Speaking of *Stray Cat Rock - Sex Hunter*, you played a strong character like your later *Female Prisoner Scorpion* persona. There were also some of the outfits, the style and image, for instance the floppy hat, from that film that seemed to reappear later in the *Scorpion* series. Was that your sense of style overlapping in the later films or was it just a coincidence?

A: Whenever I had a strong role, I was always concerned to make it even stronger. But a strength originating as much from kindness and an acceptance of one's elders and of weaker people. To assume the responsibility of being the boss. To maybe go above my elders' heads to help them and be a leader. I was concerned more about a mental strength rather than any physical strength. I had that image of being a strong woman with both the movie industry and with audiences. And once you have that image, and the *look* that goes with it, it's very difficult to get away from it. People ask you again and again to do the same kind of role. I still have the association with that image in people's minds, even now.

CD: In movies like *Melody Of Rebellion (Hangyaku no merodi, 1970)* and *Bloody Feud (Soshi boryoku - ryuketsu no koso, 1971)* both at Nikkatsu and *Modern Chivalry (Gendai ninkyō-shi, 1973)* at Toei, you were one of the main stars, but the stories were dominated by the male characters, Yoshio Harada, Joe Shishido and Ken Takakura respectively. Were you frustrated when you had to take more of a backseat to the male actors?

A: Not really. It's very typical of that type of Japanese film to have a lead male character who is good-looking and strong or cruel or whatever, then for that character to have a good, strong woman behind him. It's a pattern, and I understand it. So, no, I accepted it, and I wasn't frustrated.

Q: How did your involvement with Toei studios and, in turn, the *Female Prisoner Scorpion* series occur?

A: I left Nikkatsu after working for them for six years. They were in the midst of a severe financial decline and had switched over almost exclusively to the *roman porno* films to stay in

business. I didn't agree with that policy and did not wish to participate. Toei expressed their interest, and soon afterward, the *Female Prisoner Scorpion* series began.

Q: The director of the first three *Scorpion* films, Shunya Ito, had been an assistant director for Teruo Ishii and had already been working at Toei for a number of years. His *Scorpion* pictures seem very inspired, with truly incredible imagery. It seems much care and time went into the films, more so than the usual Toei production.

A: The first one in the series, *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion (Joshu 701-go - Sasori, 1972)*, was Mr. Ito's first film as a director. When he asked me to be in the film, I was totally unfamiliar with the origin of the story, even though the *manga* was extremely popular in Japan at the time. So Mr. Ito loaned me the complete set of *Sasori manga*, and I read it. When we met for the second time, the script was ready, and I saw that they had kept most of the obscenities the character spoke in the comics. I told him that was unacceptable, that it would end up making the film seem cheap and sleazy, and that taking them out was one of my conditions for accepting the role. He agreed with me and came to believe it would be more interesting if my character hardly spoke any dialogue, except for a few important sentences. We decided we could convey what *Scorpion* was thinking, what she was going to do next, by the performance, by the visual instead of the verbal. So we had to work hard on the visuals. What we did was quite radical and a new concept. Since this was Mr. Ito's first picture, and we were trying to shoot in sequence, which is almost never done in the Japanese film industry, it took a long time. Also during that period, the whole industry across the board was slashing budgets on the average feature film. The shooting schedule for Toei films, even the bigger ones with stars like Ken Takakura, was three weeks. But because we were shooting in sequence, it took four months which is extremely long. Fortunately, Mr. Ito was head of the union then so the higher-ups cooperated. Once the movie was released, it became a huge hit, both because of the *manga's* popularity and because of the unique way we approached *Scorpion's* character. The fact that we had her barely speak at all was quite sensational.

Q: All four of the *Scorpion* pictures you appeared in, but especially the second and third ones, *Jailhouse 41* and *Beast Stable*, seemed to be shot under grueling conditions. You were often being sprayed by real fire hoses, tied up and beaten, or nearly drowned in subterranean chambers. What was it like shooting those scenes?

A: When I did the first film, I was thinking to myself, okay, I'm going to do this and then it'll be over for the *Scorpion* story. She beats the system in the end and then that's it. But the picture was such a huge hit, Toei obviously wanted to make it into a series. Once you turn a film into a series, it's extremely difficult to maintain the same quality or surpass the quality of the original. Just on a realistic level, the things the main character goes through, it's almost impossible to believe she could survive. So unfortunately you have to put these antics, these more fantastic elements into the film. The whole thrust of each film's scenario would be to abuse and beat the *Scorpion* character until she once again exacted revenge at the climax, and as a result give the

audience what they expected from the series. Consequently, yes, the shooting was very hard. We were working towards a New Year's release date, so we shot the scene that comes at the beginning of *Jailhouse 41*, the scene where I'm sprayed by the fire hoses in the dungeon, at the end of November when it was extremely cold. We couldn't even use hot water because you would see the steam rising off me and off the set. It became more a test of physical endurance rather than acting skill. I had to be more concerned about not getting sick, not getting hurt on the set. It was, in some ways, very limiting physically and mentally. The shooting was *so* brutal. Then the consciousness of each successive film became more and more grotesque, more radical just to maintain the audience, to make sure the pictures were hits. That was why after the fourth film, *#701's Grudge Song*, I just could not do the role anymore.

Q: *Lady Snowblood* and *Lady Snowblood - Love Song Of Vengeance*, how did those come about?

A: I was offered the two films at Toho after the second *Scorpion* film was done. And this series was also based on a popular *manga*.

Q: Were you the one behind Toshiya Fujita being assigned to direct, since he had directed two of the *Stray Cat Rock* pictures?

A: No, that was Toho. I wasn't involved in helping to choose the director.

Q: Both of the films, especially the second, showed sympathy for the radical left wing characters who were oppressed and persecuted by fascist Japanese authorities. Was that kind of sensibility in the original *manga* or was that more from director Fujita?

A: The films were very faithful to the spirit of the original *manga*. That sympathy towards the radical left was already there. It was one of the things that made the series interesting.

Q: Did Toho have a problem with that at all?

A: No, Toho knew it was in the original *manga* and that the films were close adaptations.

Q: In the first *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* sequel, *Hiroshima Death Match (Jingi naki tatakai - Hiroshima shito-hen, 1973)*, you played a different type of character, a woman who is dominated by her uncle, a cruel boss played by Hiroshi Nawa, and has an outcast yakuza lover played by Kinya Kitaoji. It seems as if this part must have been quite draining emotionally.

A: That role was different because I was having to subject my emotions to the rest of the cast. I was not necessarily drawing on *my* feelings as a woman to play the role but more from technique. It was good because I got to show more serious, more typical womanly emotions

in the character than I was used to.

Q: I haven't seen *Jeans Blues - No Future (Jinzu burusu - asu naki buraiha, 1974)*, but I recently found the magnificent poster with you holding the shotgun.

A: (laughs) Please don't see it! I stand on being a professional, but I can't say really anything good about it. I suppose the way the picture came about boils down to Toei marketing and studio politics to some extent. The *Scorpion* films had been hits in Tokyo but had not done as well in Kyoto. So Toei's Kyoto branch asked us to shoot the *Jeans Blues* film there to see if they could turn it into a hit in that area. I had this feeling of obligation to Toei Kyoto. But after reading the script, I didn't like it and didn't really want to do it. I still haven't seen the film (laughs).

Q: What was it like working with Shintaro Katsu and Ken Takakura in *Homeless (Mushuku, 1974)*?

A: That was intended to be a kind of Japanese version of *Going Places (Les valseuses, 1974)* with Gerard Depardieu.

Q: Oh, the French film...

A: It was a fabulous opportunity getting to work with them. I truly think that they are two of the top actors in the history of Japanese film. It was a real pleasure watching those guys work. They are so great.

Q: You made three pictures with director Yasuzo Masumura. Could you talk about working with him, particularly on *Love Suicides At Sonezaki*?

A: It was my dream to work with Mr. Masumura from the time I was working at Nikkatsu. When I stopped working at Toei and Toho, I met Ms. Kaneda who is my manager now, and she had been working at Daiei, working with Ayako Wakao who, as you know, did many movies with Mr. Masumura. When Ms. Kaneda found out how badly I wanted to work with him, she thought it was a good idea, and it was really her idea to cast me in *Love Suicides*. It was extremely hard with the fundraising on that picture, there was no guaranteed salary, and I ended up doing it for basically nothing.

We shot it in nineteen days, and for the last seventy-two hours of that, the whole cast and crew went without sleeping to get it done. Mr. Masumura was a complete perfectionist. If he didn't like what you were doing in your performance, he would make you do it over and over again until it conformed to his vision. I'd never worked with a director like that before. But I didn't mind. He had power and strength as a director. I learned so much from him. He had been a first assistant director under Kenji Mizoguchi, and had also studied with many Italian directors at the Centro Sperimentale in Rome. He was so unlike all other Japanese film people. He had both an international sensibility and an international reputation. Whenever I would have trouble later, something would click in my mind, I would think of something he had said when he was

shooting the film. I so much wanted to work with him again, but unfortunately he passed away. It's my regret I wasn't able to do one more film with him.

Q: Unfortunately, I am not that familiar with your films after 1980. Are there any of your other films you'd like to talk about? Or anything in general?

A: The latest is *Onihei's Crime File (Onihei hankacho, 1995)*, a movie version of a *jidai-geki* TV series about a samurai detective played by Kichieon Nakamura.

Something that really should be said is—and this is even more true since *Love Suicides At Sonezaki*—much of the film industry has been corrupted by studio politics, the idea of focusing more on the image as well as the performer's age. Once they get a certain image of you, they don't want anything different. As an actress, I can play anything from a young girl to an old woman, or anything in between. As a rule, the industry will not give you the opportunity to show you can do something different. For instance, in America, middle-aged actresses like Meryl Streep can go from movies like *Falling In Love (1984)* to thrillers like *The River Wild (1994)*, and it's applauded. But rarely here in Japan. When Japanese men see a strong actress in an American film, a woman who is assertive, many of them will make comments like "I could never fall in love with a bitch like that!". It makes me very sad. Sometimes Japanese men as a whole can be childish.

Anyway, at the time that *Love Suicides* was released, there was an organization called ATG, or Art Theater Guild, which funded certain projects that filmmakers couldn't do elsewhere. It was possible to do something experimental or unique and get away from movie company politics. It's almost impossible to make a profit as an independent production, so it's not surprising ATG doesn't exist anymore. None of their films ever made any money. The Ministry of Culture also supported films a bit with grants. *Love Suicides* had gotten a grant from them as well as ATG, but it added up to so little money when you factored in all the expenses. For the most part, movie companies are geared for the highest profit margin, and somehow they *do* make money. That's all they seem to care about, no matter the quality of the output. It's funny, because after *Love Suicides* I received several awards, but it really made no difference in terms of getting jobs. The movie companies see a performer getting an award and suddenly they think, oh, this person got an award, they won't possibly consider this role because it's too small or it's beneath them. It's hard to survive. It's almost impossible to make a living just from film. Actors and actresses have to do a lot of TV and theater to make a living. There's a very strong hierarchy, not only in the film industry but in Japanese business and society in general, and it's quite difficult to make a living if you go outside the system. It's very difficult for me to get involved in movies, the kind of movies I'd like to do. And the kind of stuff I'm offered now, I really don't want to do.

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THE BIRTH OF SCORPION: AN INTERVIEW WITH CREATOR TORU SHINOHARA

by Yoshiki Hayashi

This interview was conducted by phone in April 2016, and translated into English by Marc Walkow. Many thanks to Daichi Yashiki at Toei Tokyo for helping with arrangements.

Q: How did you first become a manga artist?

A: I was born in 1936, so my boyhood years were spent just after the war had ended, and during that era there was a real hunger for art, including comics. Right at that time, foreign comics started to appear on the black market, like *Blondie* and books featuring Disney's Mickey Mouse and so on. And later, I was able to borrow and read specialty comics by authors influenced by Disney, such as Osamu Tezuka. It was through submissions to these old-fashioned "rental-book"-style of manga¹ that many artists were able to find a pathway to success. But since the letters columns of manga magazines released by the major publishers, like *Shonen*,² or Kodansha, Shogakukan and Shueisha, were full of fans, the threshold was extremely high for newcomers. But sometimes, low-level folks like us would send in submissions, they'd be accepted, and that would be our debut. I think that was pretty much the way it started.

I never had a manga teacher or master. What had the biggest influence on me in terms of creating a story were movies. I watched movies all the time. When I was a student, especially in high school, I used to skip class to go to morning preview shows.

And for me, it was always western movies. Not Japanese ones. Also not really American movies with happy endings, but films which probed the depths of humanity, like French or Italian films which depicted complex and deep states of being. I loved those, and couldn't get enough of those kinds of films. To name a few of them from our era, I'd say films with actors like Jean Gabin and Alain Delon. Films like *Purple Noon* (1960), *People of No Importance* (1956), and *The Wages of Fear* (1953). I saw all those masterpieces. As for actresses, of course foreign women are very beautiful, but I like that they also have a quality of being vulnerable, yet capable of a harsh look. We divided them between Monroe-type and Brigitte Bardot-type. I personally preferred the Bardot-type, because she had style but also possessed a curvaceous

¹ Rental books, or *kashi-hon*, were published specifically to be rented at specialty stores. Dating back to the Edo period, in the 18th and 19th centuries, books had always been expensive in Japan, and shops like these thrived in low-income communities by serving families who could not afford to own books of their own. From the early 20th Century up until the 1960's, many popular books and magazines were loaned out, particularly manga, which were often rented to children.

² A monthly comic magazine published by Kobunsha; Osamu Tezuka's *Astro-Boy* was published here beginning in 1952.



beauty that could be like a painting. I was really attracted to these films, and in my comics, I aspired to try to draw those kinds of women. How to develop a story, where to insert a climax, how to construct a final scene - all of that I learned by watching movies.

Additionally, while I was sending in these magazine submissions, I took a correspondence course in manga for one year. At that time, there was only one company offering those courses. It was called The Fine Arts Academy (*Geijutsu gakuin*),³ and I studied with them for one year. I sent off the comics I drew so that they could be graded, and in that way gained a better appreciation of my own abilities. And since I usually received a score of 80 or more, I was told “you have a pro-level grade.” Because I was always getting around 80 points, I thought, hey, maybe I really can become a professional at this. But because I lived in the countryside of Shikoku, in Ehime, and the only professional manga artists whom I might look up to lived very far away, realizing my own ability in this fashion was my most important goal.

Q: What was your first published work?

A: It was a rental-book called *Roman Hakase (Dr. Wax Mask)* (1958) for Doshinsha. It was an offshoot of the American 3D movie *House of Wax* (1953). Actually, even earlier than that, there was someone who had produced my debut but that manuscript was taken away from me. Whether this kind of thing happened just to me, or to others as well, I don't know. When I investigated it later, I discovered that that person had been confined to a sanatorium for tuberculosis. I thought, that's enough then, and gave up on it.

When I first went to Tokyo, the era of the rental book had ended. All the rental-book merchants were going bankrupt, because television had emerged as a more popular form of entertainment. Small rental-book publishers were going under one by one, and the last one to be left standing was Osaka's Hinomaru Bunko.⁴ Thinking that I should go to the biggest place, I started drawing for Hinomaru Bunko but all the artists who had been in Osaka - like Takao Saito⁵ and Fumiyasu Ishikawa⁶ - had since moved on to Tokyo. The place was empty, and there were no other artists around - that was why I had been given such a quick opportunity to enter the business. Hinomaru Bunko's artists and writers - Joya Kagemaru,⁷ Hiroshi Hirata,⁸

³ A popular correspondence course devoted to learning how to draw comics, founded by Konosuke Nagane.

⁴ Founded in 1951, Hinomaru Bunko was a popular rental book publisher which also went under other names in later years. Some of their more popular manga magazines included *Kage* or *Mazo*. They went out of business in the early 1970's.

⁵ Born in 1936, comic artist and creator of *Golgo 13* and *Muyanosuke*. A legendary innovator in the world of Japanese comics, Saito introduced the idea of the production line and division of labor system to the Japanese manga business, modeling it after the American comic book industry. His influence in the world of Japanese comics is so great he could be said to be the father of the *gekiga*.

⁶ 1937-2014, comic artist active in rental comic book industry, later an assistant to Takao Saito.

⁷ 1940-2012, comic artist and creator of *Waru* and *Karate baka ichidai*.

⁸ Born 1937, comic artist and specialist in samurai-era stories.

his younger brother Shinzo Tomi,⁹ Masaharu Yamamoto,¹⁰ Kiyoshi Numata¹¹ - were all from Osaka, you see. Hinomaru Bunko's best-selling magazine was called *Kage (Shadow)*, and all of us newcomers were given great pages to draw, even the opening splash pages, because there were no other artists left working there. I drew for Hinomaru Bunko for about six years. My whole time there I was alongside Shinji Mizushima;¹² he was originally from Niigata but had come to Osaka to draw. Before long, both he and I went to Tokyo to work for a serial magazine. And after that, the only one left in Osaka was Tatsuhiko Yamagami.¹³ He was an editor as well as a manga artist. It's possible K. Motomitsu¹⁴ was still there, too; later on he created the original work of *Golgo 13*. They revived Hinomaru Bunko for a second time, but in the end, it also went out of business.

In Tokyo, my first magazine appearance was in Houbunsha's *Comic* magazine.¹⁵ I wrote short suspense stories there and my reputation grew. When I received an order to create something erotic with a female protagonist next, I wrote *Mehyo Mako (Female Panther Mako)* (1965). At that time, the editorial department didn't really know much about comics; they were in a state of fumbling around to figure out what kind of manga would be popular next. So I wrote something with the setting of a female college student protagonist who becomes a lady detective by night. And that continued to be serialized for about six years.

Q: What would you say your first successful manga was?

A: It was *Zubeko tantei Ran (Female Delinquent Detective Ran)* (1968), which was created at the request of Shogakukan's monthly manga magazine *Boys Life*.¹⁶ Someone from Shogakukan had supposedly seen my *Mehyo Mako*, and I thought, wow, I've finally got some kind of pull in this business! Even though it was more of a humorous comic. And because I had a pretty good reputation when compared with the works of other serial writers at the same magazine, like Takao Saito, I thought I might be going somewhere.

Q: What led to the creation of *Scorpion*?

A: In 1969, we got word from the editorial department that *Boys Life* would be suspended, and that in its place a manga journal called *Big Comic*¹⁷ would be started. This was their new plan, and I received a request to create something depicting, in their words, “an extreme world

⁹ Born 1945, comic artist.

¹⁰ Born 1941, comic artist.

¹¹ 1941-1996, comic artist.

¹² Born 1939, comic artist and specialist in baseball stories, creator of *Dokaben*.

¹³ Born 1947, comic artist and creator of *Gakidaka* and *Hikaru kaze*.

¹⁴ 1935-1996, comic artist and eventually story writer for *Golgo 13*.

¹⁵ Published 1966-1988.

¹⁶ Monthly magazine for young boys published 1963-1969.

¹⁷ Monthly comic magazine for adult men.

where the characters are confined somewhere and separated from other people.” Thinking to myself that it had to be in a prison or in a hospital, somewhere where the situation was severely restricted, I set out to create a women-in-prison story. Of course, a men’s prison would have worked just as well, but *Big Comic* wasn’t so famous yet, having just been established. At the time, the best-selling manga journal was Akita Shoten’s *Play Comic*,¹⁸ or Shonengahosha’s *Young Comic*,¹⁹ and no matter what we did, *Big Comic* would always be in second place behind them. So the editorial department thought that if we brought in some female readers, they could increase the circulation. Even though it was a young men’s magazine, they decided to appeal to women as well, and accordingly the first story with a female protagonist in *Big Comic* turned out to be *Scorpion*.

Prior to *Scorpion*, I’d been writing more comedy-flavored works, and so I asked whether it would be okay for me to include some comic elements in *Scorpion*, and the editorial board replied, “it wouldn’t really be a Shinohara work without comedy in it, would it?” But when I tried to write it, I found I couldn’t manage to fit in any comedy, since it was about women who’d been thrown into a cell. It wasn’t a situation I could joke about. Since I was writing about women in a confined, extreme situation, and people who had been pushed against the wall, so to speak, I could only write something serious. Since the request had been for twenty pages, I completed them all with a serious tone and sent them off. Right away, I got a call from my supervisor and the editors. “You did it! You did it! This is it!” They all loved what I’d turned in, and couldn’t stop raving about it. And from that point, it was decided to move forward with the same tone and direction.

For the issue before *Scorpion* began to be serialized (*Big Comic* 1970, #5), I had drawn a single-panel preview, featuring the face of Nami Matsushima, laughing and smiling. Because it was a monthly magazine, you see, this would appear a full month before the actual comic began. The editorial department said, “Oh, this won’t work,” and printed the opposite of what I’d drawn, making the smile much thinner, creating a more nihilistic effect. And that was published as a preview of the upcoming series.

When I was writing it, I had no personal experience of a real prison. Because of course, I’ve never gone to jail! (laughs) Thinking that I’d try to get some information on it somehow, there was a film which Toho had released called *With the Female Prisoners (Joshu to tomo ni, 1956)*, directed by Seiji Hisamatsu. It was black-and-white, with Yoshiko Kuga and others in it. Although it tried to depict how women wound up in jail, and had been shot on location at a unique women’s prison called Wakayama Penitentiary, where you could see the real walls and iron bars and so on, it wasn’t such a good film in the end. I decided that just making up a fictional “Shinohara Penitentiary” would be fine. I was once contacted by an American

¹⁸ Bi-weekly manga magazine for adult men, published 1968-2014.

¹⁹ Monthly manga magazine for adult men, published 1967-1984.

newspaper, and they asked me why riots never happen at Japanese prisons, but I had to reply that even though it’s called “Shinohara Penitentiary” in my comic, I have absolutely no knowledge about real prisons! I’ve even had other manga artist friends of mine ask me to let them use that setting. When it came to depicting the inside of the prison, at that time there was no internet, and no information available, so I read a lot of books written by former inmates and so on, and eventually made an application to tour a prison and conduct some interviews, but was turned down! (laughs) Even though I was going to go along with newspaper reporters and others, we were told that the reporters were okay but “Shinohara alone is rejected.” A prison guard at the time told me “that’s not fit for a comic book.” I even asked them to let me just take photos of the walls.

At any rate, in America there was Paul Newman’s film *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), and I used that as a major reference for my manga. The daily operation of the prison, and so on, I took from that film. It gave me a lot of ideas.

In the second half of *Scorpion*, Nami Matsushima escapes and is recaptured, then transferred to another prison, and that prison is one that really exists. I did research at that prison without asking anyone for permission! (laughs) In Osaka, crime increased in the postwar years, and existing prisons couldn’t hold everyone, so one prison was hurriedly expanded. Then when the number of criminals later decreased, it was taken out of service, and there was a plan to tear it down and build apartments or something there. I read about this plan in the newspaper, and right away, two of us went there and climbed over the fence! There were all sorts of “No Trespassing” signs, and there was a motorcycle police facility right next door, so when we jumped the fence and went inside, I was really nervous. But we took photos of everything: the solitary cells, the shared-living quarters, the warden’s office, etc. Later on, when I created Nami Matsushima’s prison break, I intentionally altered the details of the prison. (laughs) But that’s a real prison in the second half of the story. It looks a little bit like the prison that appears in Ken Takakura’s *Abashiri Prison* series of films.²⁰

Q: What was the response from readers?

A: There was quite a response! And as expected, the number of female fans increased, and we heard things like “I want to become a strong woman like her” from them. In the movies, she’s a murderer and so on, but in the manga, her crimes didn’t go quite that far. But I did create her image to express the mindset of “whatever happens to me, I’ll always pay it back double.” Until she’s attacked by someone, she doesn’t raise a hand. I had absolutely no intention of destroying the type of female character who remains passive until the point where she can no longer hold back. I wrote it hoping to pass along to readers the feeling of a woman who possesses some kind of inner secret.

²⁰ *Abashiri bangaichi*, a long-running series of prison break movies starring Takakura and directed by Teruo Ishii, with ten episodes from 1965-67.

Q: Did it become popular?

A: Once the movie was made! (laughs) My comics sold much better then, and Meiko Kaji's recording of "Urami Bushi" sold 600,000 units at the time, and I still get royalties from that to this day. The power of print is strong, but I also had the feeling that the power of movies might be even stronger.

Q: How did the manga become a film?

A: I think at first Toei sent an inquiry to the *Big Comic* editorial department. There was almost no feeling at that time from producers that they should make movie adaptations from manga. *Golgo 13* and other film adaptations all came later on. So when the editors told me, "Shinohara, Toei seems to want to make a movie out of your comic," my only thought was, "Oh, it is kind of like a Toei story, isn't it?" (laughs) Because I didn't really watch many Japanese films around that time, my feeling was that they were creating a new genre, since for a long time, samurai films had always been produced, and then yakuza movies. While I was trying to figure out why they wanted to make a movie out of this story, at the same time, chief editor Yunosuke Konishi was telling me to keep the story distinct from my original work. "If you can, please give them only 70% of the original scent," he told me.

Q: Did you make any contributions to the screenplay?

A: On the Toei side were two screenwriters - Fumio Konami and Hiro Matsuda - who had read the complete manga very carefully, and they both had a lot of experience. In general, I don't have any complaints about the film adaptation, because I believe that comics and films are two different things. If the film has a wonderful and talented crew involved, then I leave the film to them. I just ask that they leave the manga to me, and that there is a clear division between the two, and I'll have no complaints or problems.

Q: Did you visit the set, or have any influence on the production?

A: Toei's publicity department wanted to have some images of that, so I went a few times, and I met Meiko Kaji and the director. Because it was Shunya Ito's first film as a director, there was a lot of power in Kaji's lead performance. The producer told him not to use a lot of film, to be more frugal, and I think that also helped it to become a hit. When I went for my set visit, it happened to be the day they were shooting the female prisoners' shower scene, and of course I thought, "This is amazing!" There were 20 or 30 extras, and they were all fully nude! I said to myself, "They can go really far with movies these days..." And this was in the middle of winter, too. Water came out of the showers, but on set, they couldn't use hot water, so the crew told them to pretend that they were taking hot showers. I thought how hard it must be for the actresses and extras. One woman, a stripper or something, kept screaming "It's so cold! It's so cold!" I have very vivid memories of that time.

Q: How did you feel after seeing Shunya Ito's film for the first time?

A: I thought, "This is a great film!" Ito said, "Comics are great - you can make the vertical frame whatever size you want, and the horizontal frame another size to your liking. With films, you're stuck with one shape." But when I told him, "That may be as it is, but with manga you don't have any sound," he said, "Oh, you have a point there." I thought the first film made a very strong impression. Probably the first two films have the same power, because Meiko Kaji's character was on the brink of death in them both. Because it was one of her first films after moving to Toei from Nikkatsu, she threw a lot of power into it. Because of a request from our editorial department, the first film in particular had made a strong attempt to reproduce the feeling of the manga, such as in the costumes or production design. The two screenwriters were a little bit angry, though. They said, "didn't you tell us when we were drinking together that you'd leave the film to the film people?"

Q: Were there also shots that tried to reproduce the layout of the manga?

A: Yes, I think there were. Which is to say, in the old days movie directors could all draw storyboards. Almost everyone started with storyboards, and from there they turned them into moving images. Nowadays, because movie adaptations of manga are popular, they use the manga themselves instead of storyboards to envision the imagery. I think that's done quite often now.

Q: Afterwards, the series was handed over to former Nikkatsu director Yasuharu Hasebe.

A: Yes, and Hasebe was especially good at shooting women on film.

Q: What was your impression of Meiko Kaji?

A: Of course, her eyes are just amazing. In comics, the eyes are what depict a character's life. You could call it the power of the eyes, and she really had it in those days. And because she had already appeared as a lead in Nikkatsu's *Stray Cat Rock* series, she'd become quite a good actress as well. She was young, but a very reliable actress. She also had a great shape to her body, a good line. Because that's all she would let you see! (laughs) I thought to myself, "She'd make a wonderful painting." The director would always exclaim "That face, amazing! Her face is sensational!" while shooting her. Ito was the kind of director who would praise people a lot while shooting. Nami Matsushima's hairstyle might be completely different in the comic, and the *Big Comic* editorial department had problems with it being long, but I told them "It's fine for the movie." In terms of the personality of the character, though, I thought that Meiko Kaji fit her perfectly.

Q: Would you say that depictions of sex and violence are an important component to the *Scorpion* manga?

A: Because being in prison means living in an utmost extreme situation, it would be a lie not to depict the sex and violence there.

Q: Were any of your other works made into films?

A: After *Scorpion* there was *Zero Woman: Red Handcuffs* (*Zero-ka no onna - akai wappa*, 1974), directed by Yukio Noda, and he was very conscious of *Scorpion*. Ito graduated from Tokyo University, right? Well, Noda was Kyoto University. It was kind of like he didn't want to be beaten, so he familiarized himself thoroughly with it, though he never said so. But I think he put his whole spirit into it. We came up with the last scene together - we thought, "Okay, let's just do it!" It made the *Kinema Junpo* 1974 "best films" list, at #22.

Q: The character of Nami and the overall *Scorpion* story is still popular worldwide.

A: It's been over forty years since I wrote it, but because it's one of my earlier works, the artwork still has an immature feeling to it. I kind of want to re-do it all! If I can say so myself, I think the story is terrific, but I'm embarrassed by the artwork. Even now, I can't really look at something I drew only a year before. I have the feeling that everybody was really patient with me at that time. I could draw it much better if I were doing it now. But I also get the feeling that I could move better and more quickly back then than I do now.

My manga have what I call "the three 'S' theme." The first "S" is "sexy," of course. The next is "suspense." And then "speed." "Sexy, suspense, speed." Whenever something is made into a film, I ask that they please include those three "S"-es.

Now I'd really love it for someone to make a film version out of one of my newer works. I've written a lot of manga that would make good adaptations, but in order to make them feel more modern, I'd like to work with a good screenwriter. I'm getting old, after all! (laughs) Sad to say, my eyes are also getting weaker and I can't draw as well any more.

But there was an actress I was very fond of up until a little while ago. It's Sharon Stone from *Basic Instinct* (1992)! (laughs) If that era's Sharon Stone had played Nami Matsushima, her Nami would have given people goosebumps, I think.

Yoshiki Hayashi is a free editor and film and video consultant who divides his time between Tokyo and Nagasaki.



ABOUT THE TRANSFERS

The films of the *Female Prisoner Scorpion Collection* have been exclusively restored in 2K resolution for this release by Arrow Films and are presented in their original theatrical aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with mono sound.

A set of low-contrast 35mm prints struck from the original 35mm film elements were supplied by Toei Company, Ltd. These prints were scanned in 2K resolution on a pin-registered 4K Northlight Scanner. Picture grading was completed on a DaVinci Resolve and thousands of instances of dirt, debris and light scratches were removed using PFClean software. Overall image stability and instances of density fluctuation were also improved. All restoration work was completed at Pinewood Studios.

The images on all four *Female Prisoner Scorpion* films favor a noticeably cyan/blue look throughout. This look was inherent in the film materials supplied and relates to how these lab materials were created, as well as how the original elements have faded over time. With these restorations, we have aimed to present the films as close to their intended original style and appearance as possible.

The original mono soundtracks were transferred from the original 35mm optical sound negatives and were conformed and restored at Pinewood Studios.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films

Materials made available by Toei Company, Ltd: Daichi Yashiki

Additional reference materials supplied by Eureka Video: Kevin Lambert

Restoration services by Pinewood Studios:

Color grading: Carl Thompson, Michael Davis

Restoration technicians: Lucie Hancock, Rob Langridge, Jake Chapman

Audio conform & restoration: Jason Stevens

Conform & deliverables: Leigh Reid

Restoration Department Management: Jon Mann, Phillip Lee

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and booklet produced by: Marc Walkow

Executive Producer: Francesco Simeoni

Technical Producer: James White

Production Assistant: Liane Cunje

QC: Nora Mehenni, Marc Walkow

Proofing: Liane Cunje, Marc Walkow

Blu-ray and DVD Mastering: David Mackenzie

Subtitling: IBF Digital

Artist: Ian MacEwan

Design: Jack Pemberton

FURTHER VIEWING

Actress Meiko Kaji also appears in the Arrow Video releases of *Lady Snowblood*, *Blind Woman's Curse* and the *Stray Cat Rock* series, as well as in the second films of the *Battles Without Honor and Humanity* and the *Outlaw Gangster VIP* series. Director Yasuharu Hasebe's other films include the Arrow Video releases of *Massacre Gun*, *Retaliation* and three films in the *Stray Cat Rock* series.

FURTHER READING

Chris D., *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005)

Patrick Macias, *Tokyoscope: The Japanese Cult Film Companion* (San Francisco: Cadence Books, 2001)

Tom Mes & Jasper Sharp, *The Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2005)

Look for *Unchained Melody: The Films of Meiko Kaji*, a new book from author Tom Mes about the iconic actress, coming soon from Arrow.

SPECIAL THANKS

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