

# VARIETY

## Film Review: 'Suffering of Ninko'



*Maggie Lee*

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A monk from the Edo Period gets in touch with his inner pervert in “Suffering of Ninko,” a costumed soft-core curio that’s beyond weird even by Japanese standards. The partially crowd-funded debut by young writer-director Norihiro Iwatsukino merges live action with animation representing various styles of Japanese art in both beautiful and bawdy ways. As a pastiche of Japanese erotica with a dash of folkloric fantasy, it’s quite original, though due to budget constraints, the direction and performances in live-action scenes are pretty crude. Still, cheesy production values, a tongue-in-cheek attitude, and the seriously bizarre plot stand to make this a cult favorite at festivals large and small.

In addition to writing and directing, Iwatsukino multi-tasks as writer-director, producer, editor, animator, and visual effects supervisor. His arts-school background is evident in his resourceful culling of traditional Japanese art forms, from Buddhist mandala drawings to ukiyoe woodblock prints to shunga erotic drawings. For a tyro filmmaker, the seamlessness with which he mashes live action and animation shows considerable promise in directing more mainstream CGI-heavy fantasy down the road. He also borrows from “Hyakumonogatari,” a collection of ghost stories evolved from a parlor game, while mixing in ’70s sexploitation tropes, to the extent that the result hovers between spooky and kitsch.

With a portentous voice that comes across jarring when applied to such profane content, narrator Qyoko Kudo relates the woes of Ninko (Masato Tsujioka), a novice monk who begins his training at Enmeiji temple. Despite his sincere dedication to asceticism, he attracts unwanted attention without lifting a pinkie. When he begs for alms on the street, he's mobbed by women. It's not just the opposite sex who find themselves attracted to him either; the temple has plenty of horny gay monks flirting with him, too. Closeups of his admirers contorted with lust are crosscut with lurid ukiyoe portraits of "women in the water trade," giving the scenes a striking tableau effect.

One day, Ninko encounters a girl wearing a Noh mask (Reina Yukara) in the forest. When she takes it off, the creepy result recalls Magritte's surrealist blank faces. Yet, instead of running for his life, Ninko is flushed with an impulse he couldn't comprehend and succumbs to sweaty, torrid hallucinations, animated with a trippy psychedelic style. He tries to escape his cursed predicament by becoming an itinerant pilgrim.

When he passes by Akatsuki village, he is entreated by the village chief to join forces with a ronin named Kanzo (Hideta Iwaishi) to combat Yama-onna (Miho Wakabayashi), a mountain goblin in crimson rags who seduces men in order to suck their male vitality dry. The filmmaker's wacko taste is evident in the portrayal of Yama-onna, who looks like she's modeling Comme de garçons' fall collection, and the corpses of her victims, which are like wax figures.

The film's theme of embracing one's dark side, expressed through Kanzo's confession of his hidden vice, is stunningly illustrated on Japanese shoji screens in ultra-violent "Kill Bill" style. Finally, the mystery of Ninko's devastating desirability is solved during his climactic encounter with Yama-onna, making for an ending that's both tantalizingly strange and blatantly nonsensical.

Iwatsukino's animation of two-dimensional art is extraordinarily imaginative, and is especially apt when expressing Ninko's twisted visions and hallucinations, as when Ninko sees root vegetables cut into round shapes and envisages them as burnished Buddhist icons. However, even factoring in the shoestring production budget, Iwatsukino's direction leaves much to be desired. Not only does the narrative move forward in a jumpy way, giving the impression of a succession of skits, but performances also rely too heavily on the same stony-faced expressions. DPs Shunichiro Yamamoto and Takayuki Okazaki just about scrape through when shooting temple interiors but their outdoor cinematography is a sloppily composed mess.

<http://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/soul-on-a-string-review-1201803695/>



# Suffering of Ninko

## Ninko no junan

Gateway | Dragons & Tigers

We're in the ancient Japan of the *Hyaku-monogatari* (the classical ghost-story anthology *The Hundred Tales*), but you've never seen a Japanese period movie like this before. Ninko is a virtuous Buddhist monk who's embarrassed to discover that he's irresistible to many women (and some men). After a particularly troubling encounter with a masked woman, he undertakes a journey to "purify" himself, hoping that this will equip him to rebuff sexual advances. He meets the samurai Kanzo and hears of a village decimated by the rapacious mountain goddess Yama-onna, who kills men to absorb their energy. Finally Ninko has a quest to fulfill...

Niwatsukino's wildly enjoyable debut is crammed with humour and visual surprises. At a time when 95% of Japanese indies are about the emotional and sexual-identity problems of young people, it is (to say the least) refreshing to find a movie that goes for broke with a subject that blows genre conventions apart while offering gutsy storytelling, vivid performances and a fabulous sense of cinema's possibilities. Buddhists will love it, but so will most everyone else.

— Tony Rayns

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