





TAKASHI MIIKE'S  
**AUDITION**

Directed by **TAKASHI MIIKE**

Screenplay by **DAISUKE TENGAN**

Based on the novel by **RYU MURAKAMI**

Produced by **AKEMI SUYAMA** and **SATOSHI FUKUSHIMA**

Director of Photography **HIDEO YAMAMOTO**

Production Designed by **TATSUO OZEKI**

Edited by **YASUSHI SHIMAMURA**

Music composed by **KOJI ENDO**

**RYO ISHIBASHI** as Shigeharu Aoyama

**EIHI SHIINA** as Asami Yamazaki

**TETSU SAWAKI** as Shigehiko Aoyama

**MIYUKI MATSUDA** as Ryoko Aoyama

**RENJI ISHIBASHI** as Old Man in the Wheelchair

**JUN KUNIMURA** as Yasuhisa Yoshikawa



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## GUILTY OF ROMANCE: LOVE, LONELINESS AND LOSS IN TAKASHI MIIKE'S AUDITION

by Anton Bitel

“When you grow up, you’ll understand,” says middle-aged Aoyama (Ryo Ishibashi), explaining to his teenaged son Shigehiko (Tetsu Sawaki) why he prefers to wait for big fish rather than reel in the small fry. “It’s called romanticism.”

This exchange in Takashi Miike’s *Audition* (1999) follows immediately upon a prologue - and also the film’s primal scene - set seven years earlier, in which Aoyama’s wife Ryoko (Miyuki Matsuda) had died in hospital. Now, as father and son angle together by the sea, they are discussing women as much as fish, with Shigehiko urging Aoyama to start considering remarriage.

Apart from a single dalliance with his secretary - definitely no big fish for him - Aoyama has been out of the dating game for years, so he turns for advice to his film producer friend Yoshikawa (Jun Kunimura). Yoshikawa suggests that they announce a production together (“It’ll be a romantic story,” he says), and that Aoyama use the audition process to select the young woman of his dreams. A proposal so deceitful and objectifying ought to leave little room for romanticism, yet there is something in the way that Aoyama conducts himself - all boyish embarrassment and painful sincerity - that contrasts with Yoshikawa’s more obvious cynicism and misogyny.

In her written submission, one applicant, 24-year-old Asami (Eihi Shiina) compares having to give up her beloved ballet to “accepting death”. Reading this, Aoyama is already smitten, drawn to the sense of loss, and the willingness to move on, that he shares with her - and the audition itself has become an unnecessary formality before it even starts. Aoyama goes on several dates with Asami, and despite Yoshikawa’s misgivings, takes her to a coastal hotel where he aims to propose.

After Asami asks Aoyama to promise to love her alone, they sleep together - and he awakens to find her gone. Tracing the few clues he has about her past, Aoyama

discovers a trail of mutilation and murder - and is then himself drugged, tortured and maimed by Asami in his own home, until Shigehiko returns...

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Adapted from Ryu Murakami's 1997 novel, *Audition* would change everything for Miike. Since his 1991 debut *Toppuu! Minipato tai - Aikyacchi Jankushon* ("A comedy about a daring policewoman in leotards, who defeats criminals using gymnastics", according to IMDb), he had already directed an extraordinary 34 features, mostly cheap straight-to-video V-Cinema titles that allowed him to play fast and dirty with different genres. He had garnered attention at home with the theatrical release of his 'Black Society Trilogy' - comprising *Shinjuku Triad Society* (1995), *Rainy Dog* (1997) and *Ley Lines* (1999). Meanwhile other films like *Fudoh: The New Generation* (1996), *The Bird People In China* (1998) and *Blues Harp* (1998) were getting him notice on the outskirts of the festival circuit, with *Fudoh*, rather improbably, appearing among *Time* magazine's ten best films of 1997. The international stage was now set for Miike, and *Audition*, living up to its own title, would offer a dazzling showcase of the director's singular talents and fearless sensibilities.

Showing out of competition at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2000, *Audition* won Miike the FIPRESCI Prize and KNF Award, leading to a theatrical release in Holland later in the same year. Similar awards would follow at the Jeonju Film Festival 2000 and Fantasporto 2001 - but such official festival recognition was arguably less important to the film's growing reputation than reports from Rotterdam of record walkouts during its vicious, visceral final act, or of one female viewer there who accused the director, to his face, of being "evil". *Audition* was now a *succès de scandale* - a film that could be sold, rather unfairly, on its shock value alone. In Britain, following screenings in 2000 at the inaugural FrightFest and the Raindance Film Festival, it would be shown in cinemas by Metro Tartan mid-March 2001 - in fact Miike's first UK theatrical release in the UK - and would become, along with Hideo Nakata's J-horror *Ringu* (1998), a central plank in Tartan's newly launched 'Asia Extreme' label. Meanwhile, *Audition* was the second of Miike's features to screen theatrically in the US, released in early August 2001, less than two months after his *Dead Or Alive* (1999), and said to have earned more from its brief and limited New York run than from its entire theatrical release in Japan. Miike had arrived.





*Audition* would prove a hard film to pin down. Though it shares with *Ringu* and other J-horrors an otherworldly female avenger with long dark hair as well as a key scene involving a telephone as the medium between two worlds, there is little room in *Audition* for the genuinely supernatural, as the particular ghosts that haunt Aoyama are of a decidedly psychological bent. Likewise, while the gruelling torments with which it ends (needles, dismemberments) might, with hindsight, seem to make *Audition* align neatly with ‘torture porn’, in fact that subgenre emerged very specifically from Western anxieties over the methods their nations were using abroad in the aftermath of 9/11. Miike may, famously, have had a cameo in Eli Roth’s *Hostel* (2005), but Miike’s own brand of corporeal depravity had nothing - indeed, in historical terms, *could* have nothing - to do with American adventurism and impropriety in the Middle East, or with the atrocities of Abu Ghraib, Guanatánamo Bay and Bagram. Miike’s sadistic monstrosities were more personal than political.

As hard as it might now be to comprehend for a new generation of horror fans who cut their teeth on the *Hostel* and *Saw* franchises, part of the reason that the final scenes of *Audition* had such a strong impact was that, around the turn of the millennium, viewers were simply not inured to seeing such wincing unpleasantness on their screen. This was a time when Western horror was still working through the quivering remains of its postmodern, post-*Scream* phase, and intensity, whether emotional or physical, was just not part of the genre’s current makeup. What Miike had delivered seemed something altogether fresh and *sui generis*.

There were other elements that contributed to the impact of that ending. First, there was the way that *Audition* takes its time carefully building to his climactic horror, focusing, with unusual seriousness, on its protagonist’s outer and inner life before finally putting him on the rack. Aoyama is not some casual pin-cushion for a conventional cinematic slasher, but a fully realised flesh-and-bone character with whose virtues and vices the audience has come, slowly, to identify - which means that once Asami eventually gets her hooks in him, viewers feel their sting all the more deeply. Then there is the irrational sequence of events that leads up to, and even intrudes upon, Aoyama’s torture. As Aoyama looks for the missing Asami, chronologies become confounded, identities blur and the dead come back to life, so that his frantic, bewildered search comes to match and modulate the increasing disorientation of the viewer, who is just as lost in Miike’s

nightmarish terrains. Lastly there is the incongruity of Shiina’s purring performance - her quietness and even sweetness jarring with the unspeakable acts that she carries out upon her supine lover. In her white shirt and precisely fitted fetish apron, with her cajoling half-smile and softly spoken tone, this destructive dominatrix turns torture into something cute and (for her) fun.

So horrific did this heady mix of contrasts prove that viewers were left imagining that they had seen on screen a lot more than Miike ever actually shows them - one of many signs that a truly great director is at work. This ending would make such a striking, shocking impression on audiences, leading to uncomfortable writhing, palpitations, even the odd alleged fit of fainting, that it was often all that they would remember or talk about afterwards. Yet while the ending is unquestionably sensationalist and extreme, overlooking its context involves missing out on the self-flagellating nature of Aoyama’s ordeal. For his pain and passion are products of his own inner torments, and their solution, if he can ever stop punishing himself, may be lying, damaged but very much alive, right by his side.

*Audition* is a study of a conflicted self, as Aoyama’s desire to move on from Ryoko, and his emerging, endearing puppy love for Asami, come tinged from the start with anxiety and guilt. Aoyama expressly worries about the “fraudulent” nature of the audition process proposed by Yoshikawa, telling his friend before the first actress comes in, “I feel like a criminal.” He also feels that he is somehow betraying Ryoko in fishing about for a new wife (note the way, just before he starts reading through the actresses’ résumés piled on his desk, he turns Ryoko’s photo away). He is visibly embarrassed when revealing Asami’s young age to Yoshikawa. And although Aoyama falls fast for Asami, Yoshikawa’s nervousness around Asami (“I just don’t like her,” Yoshikawa insists) rubs off on Aoyama. Really all that Aoyama knows about Asami’s history is what was written in her résumé, and although she has a perfectly good explanation for why one of her contacts does not check out (she was advised, she says, to exaggerate in her application), Yoshikawa’s doubts nag at the periphery of Aoyama’s consciousness. Reluctantly heeding his friend’s advice, Aoyama is shown hesitating to call Asami. We then see Asami herself sitting in her room in an alarmingly unnatural pose, her head down, her face occluded by hair, just waiting for the phone to ring - while a mysterious sack lies on the floor in the background. This sequence is usually taken to be part of



the film's reality, but notably Miike cuts away to a shot of Aoyama asleep in his bed, followed by his dream of Ryoko retreating behind a tree. It is further implied that this and subsequent scenes of Asami in her room are dreamt up by Aoyama because he will later visit that same room himself in a sequence that is unequivocally a dream, even though he has never seen it in real life. That sack, and the horrific human contents that eventually emerge from it, represent the baggage that Aoyama worries his young innamorata may be harbouring. Once that idea has lodged, Aoyama will keep revisiting that fantasy room, until his compulsive anxieties will culminate in the extended nightmare of *Audition's* second half, which plays as a Lynchian slave to the master narrative of the film's first half.

It is well recognised that the hallucinatory, illogical sequence that takes place between Aoyama's collapsing, poisoned, to the floor and his awakening to be tortured by Asami is obviously a nightmare. It is in fact a dream *within* a dream that begins from the moment, at the film's halfway point, that Aoyama sleeps with Asami in the hotel room. In stark contrast with the naturalistically lit reality of the film's first half, Aoyama's confused quest for Asami occurs in baroque locations marked by *giallo*-esque colour-coding; and, in further confirmation that this is all a nightmare, Aoyama is able to see a tongue still quivering (with Svankmajer-esque surrealism), though it is said to have been severed an entire year earlier. We never see this dream end - although it is interrupted when Aoyama briefly awakens (after the torture sequence but still very much bodily intact) by Asami in the bed. Aoyama is asleep, and his unconscious, riddled with uncertainty and anxiety, gives full oneiric expression to his inner conflicts. Yet even as his gynophobic doubts transform the sweet, sensitive, scarred Asami by his side into a triumphant monster, needling and pricking his guilty conscience with torments that are in fact merely psychological, a better reality lies just within his reach.

When Asami had earlier told Aoyama about her feelings of loss, he consoled her (in words echoed at the end of *Audition*), "Someday you'll feel that life is wonderful." At odds with himself and emotionally hobbled, Aoyama may eventually wake up to his own life reinvigorated and love renewed - but before that, he must endure the self-inflicted sufferings of a true romantic.

*Anton Bitel is a freelance critic based in Oxford (where he also teaches Classics). He writes regularly for Sight & Sound, Little White Lies and TwitchFilm.*

## ABOUT THE RESTORATION

*Audition* has been exclusively restored in 2K resolution for this release by Arrow Films. The film is presented in its original theatrical aspect ratio of 1.85:1 aspect ratio with 5.1 sound. The original 35mm Interpositive was scanned in 2K resolution on a pin-registered 4K ArriScan and was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris and light scratches were removed through a combination of digital restoration tools. Overall image stability and instances of density fluctuation were also improved. At a few points during the film there are noticeable jump-cuts within shots. This is as per the film's original release and has been maintained for this presentation.

The original soundtracks were transferred and mixed from the original magnetic reels by Co-Production Office, France, and were conformed and restored at Deluxe Restoration, London.

Restoration Supervised by James White, Arrow Films

Restoration services by Deluxe Restoration, London

Baselight colour grading: Stephen Bearman

Restoration Department Management: Mark Bonnici, Graham Jones

Restoration Department Supervisors: Tom Barrett, Clayton Baker

Restoration Technicians: Debi Bataller, Dave Burt, Lisa Copson, Tom Wiltshire

Audio Conform: Tom Barrett

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and booklet produced by **Francesco Simeoni**

Production Assistant: **Liane Cunje**

Technical Producer: **James White**

QC Manager: **Nora Mehenni**

Proofing: **Liane Cunje, Nora Mehenni**

Blu-ray and DVD Mastering: **IBF Digital**

Subtitling: **Arrow Video**

Illustration: **Matthew Griffin**

Design: **Jack Pemberton**

## SPECIAL THANKS

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