

KINO LORBER

REPERTORY

ANATAHAN

A film by Josef von Sternberg

1953 / Japan / 95 min. / In Japanese and English

Press materials: www.kinolorber.com

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Synopsis:

Inspired by an actual event during WWII, Josef von Sternberg's *Anatahan*, tells the story of a dozen Japanese sailors who are stranded on the remote island of Anatahan during the waning days of the war. The war ends, unbeknownst to the men, but it is then that they engage in their own private war: for dominance of their island domain and possession of the sole woman in their midst, Keiko, the so-called "Queen Bee" of Anatahan (Akemi Negishi).

Background on ANATAHAN:

Having completed two films at RKO under studio head Howard Hughes, legendary director Josef von Sternberg (*The Blue Angel*) had grown dissatisfied with the Hollywood studio system. His cold war Technicolor film *Jet Pilot* (produced in 1950) underwent extensive cuts by Hughes, and wouldn't be released until 1957. Hughes fired Sternberg from *Macao* (1952) during production and replaced him with Nicholas Ray.

The break from RKO occurred at an opportune time, and allowed Sternberg to fulfill a longstanding desire as a devotee of Japanese culture.

Sternberg had long been interested in making a film in Japan. He had traveled to Japan in 1936, and through German filmmaker Arnold Fanck, he met producer Kawakita Nagamasa and began discussing the possibility of working together on a project. In the intervening years, Sternberg remained in touch with Kawakita, though their correspondence was interrupted for nearly a decade when they found themselves on opposing sides in World War II. In her estimable and extensively-researched essay, "*The Saga of Anatahan and Japan*" (from which many of the details of these press notes are borrowed), Sachiko Mizuno reveals that, after the war, Kawakita was classified as Class B war criminal and barred from the Japanese film industry from 1947 to 1950. Thus it was not until 1951 that discussions of a Kawakita/Sternberg collaboration could resume, now with greater vigor since Sternberg was feeling especially embittered toward the Hollywood studio system.

"We talked about a co-production between Japan and the U.S.... which would in a way make up for the stupidity of war," Kawakita is quoted as saying in *Von Sternberg*, John Baxter's 2010 biography, "Von Sternberg proposed the story of Anatahan."

Sternberg had read a brief account in *The New York Times* of the discovery of WWII survivors found on the Mariannas island of Anatahan. A photo-rich *Life Magazine* article of July 16, 1951 provided a more detailed and sordid account, laced with innuendo about Kazuko High, the lone woman among more than 30 men, who "caused bitter rivalry and six Japanese deaths."

Agreeing on this property as their flagship production, Sternberg formed a partnership with producers Kawakita and Osawa Yoshio, who together established Daiwa Production specifically for the creation of this film. Sternberg arrived in Japan with wife Meri and their one-year-old son Nicholas on August 5, 1952 and would remain there through July 1953, when the film was completed.

Initially a deal was made to shoot the film at the studios of Toho, but the company withdrew the offer shortly for production was scheduled to commence. The producers quickly located an alternative: raw space in a large industrial complex where the jungle sets were built from scratch. It would pose a technical challenge to the crew, but Sternberg relished the idea of having complete control over every aspect of production.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the production is Sternberg's use of a huge, elaborate flowchart, diagramming the emotional conflicts in extraordinary detail (this graphical representation of the emotional structure of the film was especially helpful in overcoming the language barriers between director and cast).

Sternberg freely departed from the factual details of the actual Anatahan incident, partially to make a more dramatic film, but also to blur the connection between them, since many in Japan harbored a considerable cultural sensitivity to episode. Sternberg stated: "The reason why I decided to make a film adaptation of the Anatahan incident was not because the incident is pertinent to the Japanese nor because it happened to non-American people. How do human beings behave in the most unfortunate situation? This point is what I am most interested in. It doesn't matter what kind of racial background these people have. This great story is almost as great as *Robinson Crusoe*...I am a humanist, and I love Japan. I will never make a film to displease the Japanese people."

In his memoir *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*, Sternberg called *Anatahan* "my best film—and my most unsuccessful one." It is difficult to defend *Anatahan* as Sternberg's best, when one considers such sublime works as *Docks of New York*, *The Blue Angel*, *Blonde Venus* and *Shanghai Express*. But unquestionably it is Sternberg's most personal because of his involvement in every aspect of writing, designing, directing, and editing the film—even providing the film's voice-over narration. *Anatahan* forms a perfect bookend to Sternberg's career, with *Salvation Hunters*, an independently produced, almost documentary-like drama being his first feature.

Anatahan did not enjoy a successful theatrical release, either in Japan or the United States. *Los Angeles Times* critic Philip Scheuer dismissed the film as, "a curiosity among motion pictures that may have some esoteric interest but that to this itinerant filmgoer is largely a bore."

Still determined to find an audience for the film he had begun to realize would be his last, Sternberg re-edited *Anatahan* in 1958 and introduced footage that includes glimpses of nudity, which were more permissible in the late '50s than they would have been in 1953. According to Anthony Slide's book *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States*, Sternberg shot the nude scenes remotely, "to modify the film to increase its commercial potential...he wired his cameraman in Japan to shoot some new and more explicit sequences featuring the leading actress, Negishi. Sternberg selected several of these shots, printed them along with pieces of the sound track duped from the 1953 version, and spliced these short sequences into the existing release prints." This version was never widely released until his widow, Meri von Sternberg, working with independent distributor Alan Twyman, presented the revised *Anatahan* as a "rediscovered" film in 1976. The restoration work on this version was supervised by Ralph Sargent of Film Technology Company, Inc.

A May 19, 1977 review in *The New York Times* called the revised *Anatahan*, "virtually a one-film retrospective of that great, idiosyncratic, often off-putting director's work. There are some sequences that are bound to prompt giggles from newcomers to

von Sternberg, but there are others that immediately evoke some of the best work ever done by this great motion-picture stylist.”

In 2016, Kino Lorber approached son Nicholas von Sternberg and licensed the film for worldwide re-release. The Library of Congress, which has preserved *Anatahan*'s original assets (including a 35mm original camera negative and 35mm fine grain master) performed a 2K scan, which underwent additional digital cleanup and color correction by Kino Lorber producer Bret Wood. Working with Serge Bromberg of Lobster Films, Paris, Kino Lorber was able to obtain access to an original nitrate 35mm print of the 1953 French release of *Anatahan*, preserved by the Cinémathèque Française, which was instrumental in restoring the audio of the film, and which contained the less explicit footage later replaced by Sternberg in the 1960s.

The Kino Lorber release is the 1958 director's cut, which best represents Sternberg's true intentions for the film.

Press Quotes

“There are...sequences...that immediately evoke some of the best work ever done by this great motion-picture stylist.” – *The New York Times*

“Josef von Sternberg once said that his films should be projected upside down, to allow the audience to better appreciate the pure play of light and shadow. He was joking, of course—his films do have a profound abstract beauty, but they also have much more than that—but in his final film he comes close to making this joke a reality, and the result could be his masterpiece. A more extreme degree of stylization is impossible to imagine: the Pacific island setting was re-created entirely in a Japanese studio out of cellophane and paper (Sternberg complained that he was forced to use real water), and the actors who perform this tale of shipwrecked sailors are Kabuki-trained Japanese. Distance is built into every aspect of the production, from the shadowed, filtered images to Sternberg's own voice-over narration, yet the feelings that emerge are incredibly pure and immediate: Sternberg seems to be photographing the absolute essence of human emotion. In English and purposely untranslated Japanese.” – Dave Kehr, *The Chicago Reader*

“If the material is fascinating, the treatment is just amazing. Sternberg respects what's known of the historical truth, but uses it as a point of entry to darker, more dangerous areas. Sequences of dream-like abstraction and images of staggering beauty are recognizably the work of the man who created the image of Marlene Dietrich, but here they go way beyond Hollywood evasions and compromises. The surface perfection seems a little remote at first sight, but the film works subversively by implicating its audience in the patterns of desire and violence, discipline and surrender. It's brilliant. When was the last time you felt stark naked after a movie?” – *Time Out*

“Sternberg's last and favorite movie, a Japanese production largely scripted by color-coded flowcharts of emotional cues, attempts like none of his other films to fissure its own preposterous silk-and-shadow mythology and reveal the underlying historical reality subsumed into mock-Hollywood iconography.” – David Phelps, Anthology Film Archives

Further reading:

<http://cinema.usc.edu/assets/096/15618.pdf>

Crew:

Director

Josef von Sternberg

Writers

Josef von Sternberg

Tatsuo Asano

Younghill Kang

Michiro Maruyama

Directors of Photography

Kozo Okazaki

Josef von Sternberg

Producers

Kazuo Takimura

Josef von Sternberg

Yoshio Osawa

Nagamasa Kawakita

Editing

Mitsuzo Miyata

Art Direction

Takashi Kono

Special Effects

Eiji Tsuburaya

Cast:

Keiko Kusakabe, the 'Queen Bee'

Kozo Okazaki

Kusakabe, Husband of Keiko

Tadashi Suganuma

Kuroda

Kisaburo Sawamura

Nishio

Shoji Nakayama

Yoshisato

Jun Fujikawa

Yanaginuma

Hiroshi Kondo

Sennami

Shozo Miyashita

Doi

Tsuruemon Bando

Kaneda

Kikuji Onoe

Marui

Rokuriru Kineya

Kanzaki

Daijiro Tamura

Takahashi

Takeshi Suzuki

Amanuma

Shiro Amikura

Chizuru Kitagawa