



CONFESSIONS (KOKUHAKU)

Autumn
Season
2011

Tetsuya Nakashima wrote and directed this edgy drama about a woman who plots revenge against a handful of irresponsible youths. Yuko Moriguchi (Takako Matsu) is a teacher who spends her days looking after a class of frequently unruly seventh graders. One day, Yuko calmly announces to her class that she's leaving her job soon as she's still struggling with the recent death of her young daughter. She adds that she knows who was responsible for the child's drowning, they happen to be among the students in her class -- and that the milk they're drinking may just be infected with a deadly disease.



Though a series of flashbacks, we become witnesses to Yuko's difficulties with her students, the actions of the nameless students she believes are guilty of murder -- one of whom is planning vengeance against Yuko, while the other sinks deep into paranoia -- and the incidents that suggest the likely innocence and guilt of the parties involved.

'*Confessions*' is a long way from director Tetsuya Nakashima's previous films: while his debut

'*Kamikaze Girls*' and dizzying sugar-rush melodrama '*Memories of Matsuko*' flirted with themes of exclusion, abuse and violence, their DayGlo presentation and stylistic hubris masked a simple, sympathetic, humanist message.

Not so '*Confessions*'. It's hard to remember a film so bleakly, furiously anti-people, in which almost every character is a vicious tyrant or a deluded, deserving victim, and most of them haven't even graduated from high school. The film opens with a bravura 30-minute monologue, the first of the five 'confessions', in which teacher Moriguchi (Takako Matsu) reveals to her rowdy, self-involved pupils that the death of her beloved four-year-old daughter Manami wasn't an accident. From here, it's a freewheeling downhill spiral of degradation and death, as Moriguchi's revenge plan takes a series of savage twists, while her victims, psychotic engineering prodigy Shuya (Yukito Nishii) and remorseful recluse Naoki (Kaoru Fujiwara), become ever more desperate and unhinged.

Nakashima's signature stylistic inventiveness is exhilaratingly expressed in a series of stunning slo-mo shots of raindrops on windows and gathering storm clouds, lending a sense of impending tragedy which suffuses the entire film. The colour palette is steely and muted, a glassy, hauntingly beautiful urban landscape populated by abandoned souls. But this atmosphere of rampant nihilism can become oppressive, and it tends to squeeze the life out of the characters. This could be a problem with translation: in many scenes, dialogue between characters is overlaid with voiceover and TV news broadcasts or interspersed with flashes of text messages and emails and it's simply impossible to accurately convey this overload of information in subtitles.

'*Confessions*' was Japan's entry for this year's Foreign Language Oscar, but it came as no surprise when the film wasn't nominated: a grim, challenging drama about murderous high school kids must be an unbeatable recipe for Oscar poison. But, like all of Nakashima's films, it deserves wider attention: one of the few directors currently working who has intelligence enough to ensure that his films aren't just eye-poppingly stylish but loaded with emotional substance, his is a bold and provocative body of work. **From Time Out London, Ton Huddleston**