

The Sailor Who Fell From Grace with the Sea

UK : 1976 : dir. Lewis John Carlino : Sailor / Avco Embassy / 20th Century Fox : 105 min
 prod: Martin Poll : scr: Lewis John Carlino : dir.ph.: Douglas Slocombe
Jonathan Kahn; Earl Rhodes; Paul Tropea; Gary Locke; Stephen Black
 Sarah Miles; Kris Kristofferson; Margo Cunningham; Peter Clapham; Jenni Tolman

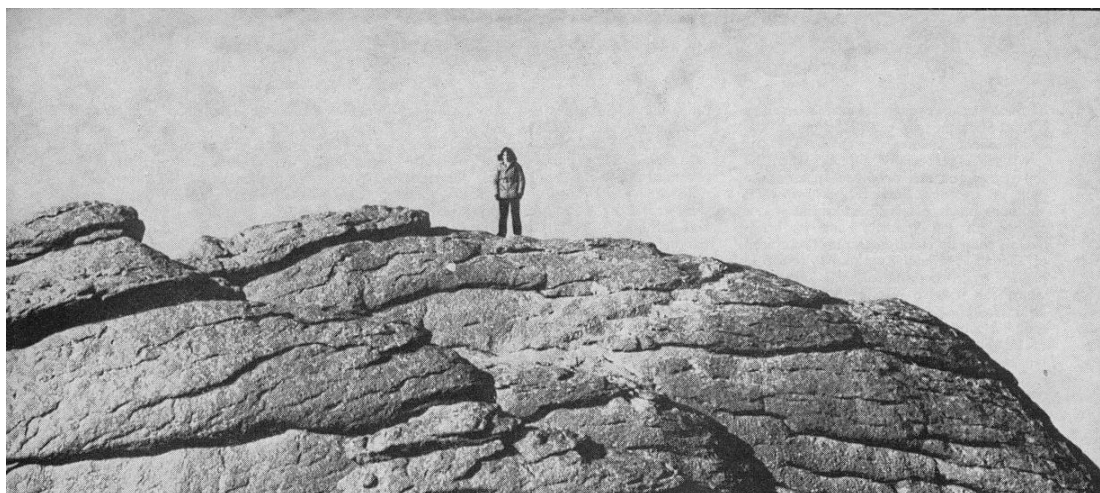
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“He gave his soul to the sea and his heart to a woman!
 Their love will arouse you –
 Their story will disturb you –
 The ending will startle you!
 Like the act of love, this film must be
 experienced from beginning to end!”



Armed with scalpel and dead cat, the Chief instructs his acolytes on the meaning of “purity” – from left to right: Earl Rhodes (Chief), Stephen Black (no.5), Gary Locke (no.4), Paul Tropea (no.2) and Jonathan Kahn (no.3)

Source (and all stills shown): Films & Filming Sept 1976



Between a rock and a hard place – Jonathan broods

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
2001 review:

"A troubled, impressionable boy tries to deal with his widowed mother's love affair with an amiable sailor, and falls under the influence of a morbid young friend. Passionate love scenes, and a bizarre ending, highlight this unusual film, beautifully shot by Douglas Slocombe on English seacoast locations. Adapted by the director from a novel by Yukio Mishima, Shot in Panavision. *** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review

"A precocious boy [*sic*] interferes with his widowed mother's affair with a sailor by castrating the latter. Weird and unattractive sex fantasy set in Dartmouth of all places and not helped by tiresome sex scenes. From the novel "Gogo No Eiko" by Yukio Mishima."

"This everyday tale of torture, scopophilia, copulation, masturbation, dismemberment and antique dealing deserves to be traded back to the Japs and made required viewing for timorous kamikaze pilots."

- Benny Green, **Punch**

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

"Yukio Mishima's brooding, erotic novella has been transformed from Japan to a coastal town in England. This is a very uneven but often striking, macabre piece about a group of five young schoolboys who commit a ritual murder upon a visiting sailor. *** "

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

"Miles and Kristofferson star in this film adaptation of an erotic novel by the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima. The setting is transplanted from Yokohama to Dartmouth, England, with less than successful results, and Mishima's chilling story becomes merely grotesque as a movie. The story involves a sailor who gives up the sea for domestic tranquility - an affair with a widow - and is gruesomely killed by a gang of teenage boys, who determine he has violated the "perfect order of things". Miles plays the widow and Kris Kristofferson co-stars as the sailor. Beautiful cinematography by Douglas Slocombe. Also with Jonathan Kahn, Margo Cunningham and Earl Rhodes. ** "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"A farcically misconceived attempt to transplant Yukio Mishima's engagingly perverse novel to an English setting, and to make its peculiarly Japanese psychology and motivations work with a set of improbable Anglo-American characters. The two main strands of plot (genteel but sex-starved widow falls for sailor who's ready to quit the sea; teenage son gets hooked on the Dangerous Ideas of the school bully and his

gang) remain obstinately unrelated, and both swing wildly



Inflexible boy (Kahn) with his masculine ideal (Kristofferson) – soon to be unforgivably deflected from his ordained place by female temptation

Source: Amazon.com

between inept naturalism and half-assed¹ melodrama; the whole thing is shot like a cross between a travelogue and a sub-standard 50s weepie.

Writer-director Carlino first castrates the book by betraying both its tone and its meaning, but then tries to compensate by introducing bits of would-be nastiness (an exploding seagull?) and bits of would-be daring (Miles and Kristofferson discreetly nude). The result is more depressing than amusing, an insult to any audience."

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"With a quartet of fine characters and performances, **"THE SAILOR WHO FELL FROM GRACE WITH THE SEA"** could have ventured just about anywhere – except where writer-director Lewis John Carlino takes it in an effort to remain faithful to Yukio Mishima's novel.

¹ What does this overworked US expression mean? Who or what could conceivably be "half-assed"? "Half-cocked" means ill-prepared (as in an old pistol), it doesn't mean "half a cock"...

Cultural differences still remain in this increasingly homogenised world and the prime problem with "SAILOR" is trying to transfer decidedly Oriental ideas about honour, order and death into an English countryside.

Mishima's novel was about a Japanese widow who falls in love with a sailor. At first attracted to the sailor as an honourable symbol, her 13-year old son defends him before his gang of idealistic schoolmates. But when the sailor leaves the sea to marry, the boy and his gang feel betrayed, and plot to kill him to restore his purity.

On film, the story won't settle down with these upper-class young English lads."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Much of Japanese culture remains misunderstood, and this inept adaptation of Yukio Mishima's novel is a perfect example. Kris Kristofferson doesn't have to stretch his limited abilities as an amiable sailor who falls in love with Sarah Miles. Her son, unfortunately,

views the relationship with less than delight.
Rated "R" for violence and sex. ** "

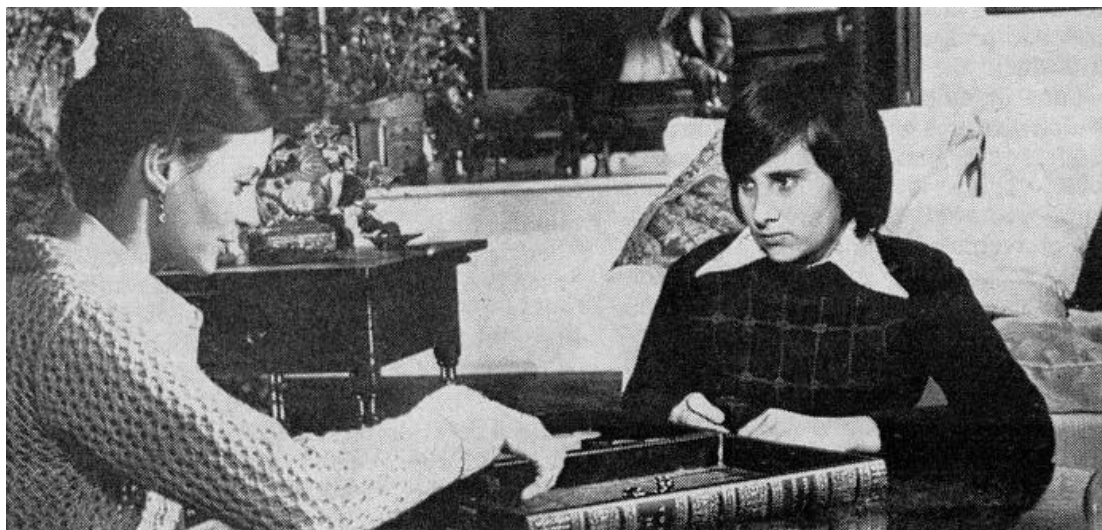


Dictionary check:

"Scopophilia: *n.* the practice of obtaining sexual pleasure from things seen, as e.g. naked bodies."

"Spank: *v.t.* to strike with the flat of the hand, to smack. – *n.* a loud slap, esp. on the buttocks (of 13-year old voyeurs)"





Mother and son enjoy a demure game of backgammon – but the real contest will not be so genteel

Films & Filming – September 1976 – caption and review:

“Directed by Lewis John Carlino from his own screenplay based on the novel by Yukio Mishima, who was nominated three times for the Nobel Prize for Literature. With Sarah Miles as a young British widow who falls in love with an American merchant seaman (Kris Kristofferson). Her son (Jonathan Kahn) sees the sailor as heroic strong man of the sea, but when the sailor makes plans to settle down to domestic life, the boy conspires to preserve the image of his idol, and return the sailor to a state of grace with the sea. Produced by Martin Poll.”

“Here in the West, Yukio Mishima is known chiefly for the manner of his death. A prolific and brilliant writer, he committed hari-kiri at the age of 45 in a way which caught the attention of thousands who, probably, had never heard his name, let alone read his work.

That’s not to say Mishima wasn’t recognised outside his native Japan. The accolades, in fact, came thick and fast: three times he was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature and his novels and short stories have been published in many tongues. Inevitably, though, something of the intensity and impact is lost in the translation. Mishima, despite his Western style of life, was concerned, above all, with the history and future of his native land; his death belonged exclusively to Japan. In English prose the characters and settings of his novels become

reflections of qualities peculiar to Japan, rather than universal and their relevance to the outside world is questionable.

On film, **“THE SAILOR WHO FELL FROM GRACE WITH THE SEA”** is a different matter. The screenplay clings closely to the original, but the background is drastically altered. Mishima’s images of clarity and beauty belong, now, to an English seaport; his philosophy of death is played out by characters all of us have seen before. The result is compelling and utterly chilling.

Sarah Miles portrays (in the best performance I have seen from her) a widow living in isolated luxury and sexual frustration on the cliffs overlooking an idyllic, small harbour. She spends her time managing a flourishing antique business and her emotions on memories and her young son, Jonathan (Jonathan Kahn). Young Jonathan (age 13) is a withdrawn child with the sensitivity and self-absorption of one who has all his mother’s attention. He has three over-riding enthusiasms: the sea, ships and a highly precocious [*sic*], intelligent and dangerous schoolmate, referred to throughout as Chief.

Jonathan is No 3 in Chief’s secret society of five. This is no ordinary schoolboy-club for at its head is a thirteen-year-old cynic with the willpower, despair and morbid philosophy of his creator. (Earl Rhodes is horribly believable in what must be the most demanding role ever thrust upon a young actor.) According to the

Chief, "morality is just a set of rules invented by stupid adults". He exhorts his followers, by a mixture of violence, patronage and brilliance, to "dismantle the rules" and seek the "perfect order". To demonstrate what he means he dissects the family cat, displaying its heart (ie essence) and explaining that the creature can now return to the state of grace it forfeited to milk-sapping and cosy living.

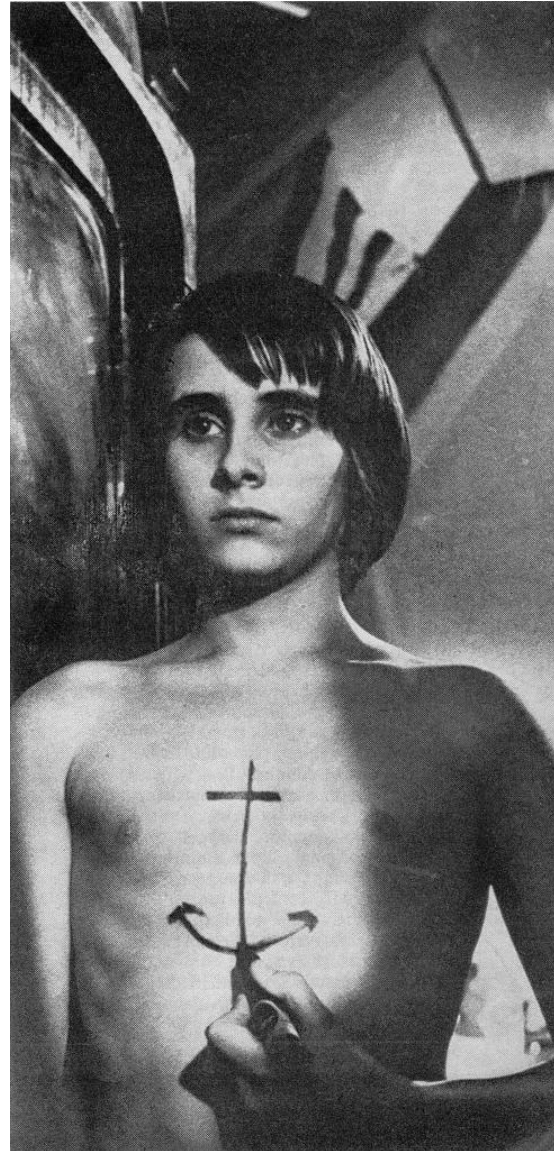
Austerity and rigid control are essential ingredients in the Chief's code. He summons his young followers to midnight meetings; when one of them doesn't show up, Chief punishes him by toppling acid over his head during a lesson in the school lab. He shows the society a series of graphically photographed sex-positions, filched from his doctor-father's surgery; when the boys crow with adolescent delight, Chief snatches the pictures, angrily berating his companions for their weakness and stupidity. Within his society the Chief demands total obedience and blind loyalty. (The parallels with Mishima's paramilitary "Shield Society" of 100 Japanese youths are frighteningly obvious.)

On an altogether different dimension the film is a sensual love affair enacted by Sarah Miles and Kris Kristofferson in the character of a virile American sailor whose tramp steamer puts into the harbour for engine repairs. They meet when she takes Jonathan on a trip to the ship. In return for the sailor's kindness she invites him to a dinner which, inevitably, ends in bed.

The two elements of the story are brought together by Jonathan who, by night, spies on his mother and her lover and, by day, hero-worships the sailor as the embodiment of his ideals of animal grace, glory and simplicity. (Kris Kristofferson brings a delicately balanced simple-mindedness and uncomplicated reasoning to the role of the sailor.) Putting up with the cynicism and biting scorn of the Chief, Jonathan persists in his hero-worship until the fateful day his mother announces she is going to marry the sailor, who will abandon his life at sea for the more alluring comforts on shore.

Jonathan feels betrayed. Mortified and disillusioned, he returns to the Chief, taking with him a journal in which he has methodically recorded the sailor's "crimes" against the perfect order. The Chief appears sympathetic; his solution is deliberate, straightforward and entirely in accord with his (and Mishima's) philosophy of grace and

retribution. On the day the sailor's ship steams towards the open sea, the five boys gather around him on a lonely headland overlooking the harbour. At their request he launches into a recital of adventures at sea while Jonathan,



Symbolic magic – but does it symbolise for him that which he desires to be? Or that which he is resolved to hunt? The anchor is also a crucifix, of course..

smiling – for the first time – with innocent charm, plies him with cup after cup of drugged tea. And there the camera pulls away, leaving our imagination to tell us all there is left to know.

Whatever your views on the deadly theme, there is no denying its power. Mishima's imagery makes wonderful material for

transposition to celluloid and John Lewis Carlino, greatly aided by his cast and camera (Douglas Slocombe), makes full use of it. The film is beautiful to behold. Mishima believed in control in all things; the camera, if possible, enhances the ordered purity of the prose. The contrast between visual delight and mental revulsion is brilliantly maintained. Under everything, including the explicitly filmed sex scenes, there is a disturbing undercurrent of ritual.

Like Mishima, Carlino has left nothing to chance or improvisation. The dissection of the unfortunate cat is mind-blowing, infinitely more shocking than the gratuitous violence usually coughed-up to us by contemporary cinema. After this sequence one waits with sweaty palms and fascinated horror for the inevitable climax which, when it comes, is a masterly example of the powers of understatement.

My only quibble is with Jonathan, who emerges as a nasty, sneaky brat whose every move is contrived to curry favour. The character is a difficult one to portray, but Jonathan Kahn could and should have made more of it. As it is his sullen looks become repetitive and by the end one can hardly wait to get him off the screen. A pity because every other element in the film goes a long way towards clarifying the enigma surrounding Mishima's extraordinary life and death. His so jealously guarded essence is contained in his work; now, like the heart of the cat, it has been prised out for all of us to see."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "A Pictorial History of the Talkies", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

The wrath of Kahn will serve as our subtitle then. Jonathan, whose mother is actress/theatrical agent Brigitte Kahn, was 15, after appearing on TV the previous year as "**David Copperfield**" (to Arthur Lowe's Micawber). In 1977 he played the spoilt Harvey in an American TV film of "**CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS**" (with Karl Malden and Ricardo – Wrath of Khan – Montalban). None of the other boys even rate a name check in *The Moving Picture Boy*, and nothing else is known of them.

What the *Films & Filming* profile of Mishima omits to mention (it was 1976 after all) is his homosexuality, awareness of which does permit other readings of the dynamics at work in his story. On the one hand we have the oedipal relationship between Jonathan and his mother, coming under threat from the prospect of another man in the house; on the other we have Mishima's conception of a disturbance in the essential fittingness of things – the rugged man of the sea tempted from his true nature by the siren song of woman.

But thirdly is the construct: boy meets man, boy worships man, man's attention is diverted to boy's mother, boy slays man in a rage of jealousy – jealousy of the *mother*, not the man. Indeed, Jonathan's voyeurism lends itself to the possibility he may be jealous of both simultaneously. The boy's possessive feelings toward his mother, and his desire to monopolise the interest and affections of the man he so admires are not mutually exclusive states. The Chief's gang and its credo are merely mechanisms to express the core thesis that women *contaminate* the essential nature of masculinity, and distract it from its proper goals in the universe. A misogynist philosophy it may be, but one which is a strong undercurrent in, for example, the Western genre, or seafaring films in general. It is by no means uniquely Oriental then. Mishima crystallised it in more explicit form than we're accustomed to. What perhaps is uniquely Oriental (today) is his balance between the value of the individual life and obeisance to abstract codes of honour and propriety.

See subject index under **ASIA** (viz the Japanese source material), **THE CHILD AS Evil in Our Midst**, **FOLLOW THE LEADER** (Children's Gangs), **MATCHMAKERS / MATCH-BREAKERS**, **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS** and possibly **SCHOOL**.

