

## Review of Frenkel's film

### *Rites of Love and Math*

*Rob Kirby*

On 1 December, 2010, I saw a *triple feature*, Mishima's Rites of Love and Death, Frenkel's Rites of Love and Math, with comments by Frenkel himself introducing the first movie, then the second, and finally summing up with questions and answers. I believe the three parts should be seen together; in particular Frenkel's movie is an homage to Mishima's, and is best understood when in combination. Frenkel's comments were interesting, provided pertinent information about the symbolism and links between the movies, and were done with charm and humor.

Mishima was a famous Japanese author and poet who wanted to make a movie and finally did so in 1965. It is based on a historical incident in 1935 during which a band of soldiers, loyal to the emperor, overthrow the corrupt (in their eyes) government. They are at first successful, the emperor is silent, but then he forcefully indicates that the soldiers are to be captured and executed.

Mishima's short movie takes place on a Noh stage and is described nicely by Lehning. It is a silent movie and the plot is outlined by five scrolls which are unwrapped for the audience to read. There is music accompanying the movie, taken from a 1935 orchestral-only rendition of the Liebestod from Wagner's Tristan and Isolde, an apt choice. The seppuku is very graphic, as Lehning says, and many of the audience looked away.

Five years after the movie was made, Mishima and a small band of followers took a general hostage and demanded the assembly of the general's troops so that Mishima could address them. He did so, but he failed to arouse them and only got jeers and disrespect. Mishima then retreated to a room and committed seppuku as *foreshadowed* by his movie. Mishima's wife destroyed all prints of the movie (which had been shown worldwide to some acclaim). On her death, it was discovered that the negatives had been stored in a jar of tea leaves, and prints were then made public in 2008. Frenkel saw the movie and got his final inspiration.

Frenkel had wanted to make a movie that would explain the beauty of math in an artistic way. While on leave in Paris, he met a French film director, Reine Graves, and they discussed various possibilities and thought of a formula for love. Frenkel then discovered a Russian poem which, translated to English, appears on the scroll that the audience reads. After seeing the Mishima movie, it all came together. Frenkel liked the idea of a Russian mathematician living in Berkeley, collaborating in Paris and making a movie that takes place in a Noh

theater. It is international, like math.

Frenkel explained various bits of symbolism. Mishima's movie has a painting on the back wall of the Noh theater with a Japanese word which could be translated as *truth*. Frenkel and Graves have an analogous painting with the Russian word for truth, and the Mathematician's lover's name, Mariko, means truth in Japanese. Frenkel also uses the Liebestod as the background music, but a version from 1965 (date of Mishima's movie). The tattooing is done in a frenzy, so as to be finished before the Mathematician is discovered; to indicate this frenzy, the music switches to a rock version of the Liebestod composed by a local musician. In Frenkel's movie, seppuku is achieved, much less graphically, by the Mathematician plunging the tattoo needle into his heart.

An important part of the evening was Frenkel's introduction, his explanation of various points, and the question and answer session at the end. It was all done intelligently with humor and an infectious smile.

An interesting sidelight is the controversy which arose previous to this showing. The Mathematical Sciences Research Institute, MSRI, had considered showing Frenkel's film, in keeping with its occasional sponsorship of events connecting math and the arts. MSRI's director, Robert Bryant, had read some of Mishima's works in college and had seen the full length feature film on Mishima by the Hollywood screenwriter and director, Paul Schrader. Bryant, and others at MSRI, had seen both films, and found them uncontroversial except perhaps for the graphic seppuku scene in Mishima's film. There were positive reviews from Europe, especially after the film was shown at the Fantasy Film Festival (when, where?). But nothing concrete happened until the Berkeley Film and Video Society decided to show Frenkel's film and rented a movie theater in downtown Berkeley. They also made a short trailer, available on line at the time. MSRI was approached and only then did Bryant agree to MSRI's cosponsorship.

The trailer contained two short excerpts from the movie, the love-making and the tattooing. Like a poem, the trailer could be interpreted in different ways depending on the viewer's perspective. In this case, a number of viewers of the trailer were offended, interpreting it as sexist with the Mathematician as male and creator of great math and the lover as merely a female with a belly to be tattooed. On Monday, Nov 22nd, Bryant began to get emails of protest. The emails soon went viral with well over 200 arriving in the next few days. Some pointed out that it could cause female mathematicians to be less likely to visit MSRI in the future. Bryant corresponded at length with the protesters, almost all of whom had seen only the trailer. Eventually he felt that the only suitable response was for him to withdraw MSRI's cosponsorship. A number of people wrote in to express their thanks.