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Max's character is so strong and coherent that we feel his personality not only as something present but as the result of a history that stands behind the present moment. Hoffman actually manages to give us at least traces of a *history* of personality.

Straight Time depends partly on an alienation effect. Nothing on screen invites our participation; we are not swept away. What we do get, however, is the working out of patterns of recognition. We don't get to know Max intimately, but we do get to recognize his patterns of action and the reasons behind those patterns. To reinforce the alienation effect, the script does not draw convenient lines between bad lawmen and oppressed outlaws. All the men in the film are hard, streaked with meanness, even

the addict Willy (Gary Busey). At one point Max's parole officer busts him for suspected parole violation; the accusation is unjust and Max is released. To avenge the injustice Max attacks the parole officer while driving on a freeway. Max's attack isn't a *clean* revenge; it's messy, improvised, and very brutal (and ends with public humiliation of the officer). However unlikeable the lawman may be, Max outdoes him in sheer ferocity and spite.

Straight Time doesn't rely on any textbook version of the system making it impossible for ex-cons to live a normal life. Incidentally, the film does reveal the strict and often ludicrous parole stipulations that an ex-con must obey. But Max is not a victim of the system. He is the product of a

series of choices, acting in conspiracy with circumstance, that have brought him to his present condition. The film is engaging because we can follow—intellectually and emotionally—this decision-making process. Hoffman lets us watch Max suffer through this process, but he doesn't contaminate the character with sentimentality or false audience sympathy. It's this, perhaps, which makes Hoffman's performance so brilliant, and one that I think will be reviewed and studied for a long time to come.

W.S. Di Piero

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A GEISHA

Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi

A New Yorker Films release. Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi. Screenplay by Yoshikata Yoda. Photography by Kazuo Miyagawa. Music by Ichiro Saito. In Japanese with English subtitles. Cast: Michiyo Kogure, Ayako Wakao, Seizaburo Kawazu, Chieko Naniwa.

Kenji Mizoguchi's *Gion-Bayashi* (*Gion Festival Music*) is having its American premiere this year under the title *A Geisha*. Filmed in 1953 three years before his death during the final, richest period of his 35-year career—after *Ugetsu* (1953) and before *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954)—*A Geisha* reveals Mizoguchi at the height of his creative power. It is quite simply a masterpiece of the highest order.

A loose reworking of his *Sisters of Gion* (1936), *A Geisha* contrasts Japan's traditional conception of the geisha's role in society with the changing values emerging in a post-war world. Eiko (Ayako Wakao), the daughter of a deceased geisha, comes to her mother's best friend and co-worker Miyoharu (Michiyo Kogure), eager to train as a "maiko" in order to follow in her mother's footsteps. In memory of the girl's mother, Miyoharu takes Eiko under her wing, borrowing the money necessary to finance the girl's training and introduce her to the best customers of Kyoto's Gion District when she is ready to "debut."

It soon becomes clear, however, that Eiko represents that part of Japan beginning to question past values, rejecting those she finds unacceptable and demanding the right to exercise free will whenever she chooses. When the girl not only spurns a prospective patron, but violently rejects his advances by biting his face so badly that he is hospitalized, her mentor Miyoharu also begins to question the basic assumptions of the profession that has provided her means of livelihood.



Eiko violently rejects a prospective patron's advances by biting his face.

A Geisha is one of Mizoguchi's most corrosive indictments of a society that consigns its women to varying forms of humiliation and degradation. Even though it is set in 1953, the film makes explicit the continuing application of feudal concepts in a country still reeling from the devastating effects of World War II. Nowhere are these lingering vestiges more apparent than in the role the geisha is expected to maintain in this world of shifting values and accelerating modernization. At one point in the film the geisha is deemed one of Japan's national treasures, comparable to the Noh, the tea ceremony and Mount Fuji. It is this increasingly tenuous tradition that the spirited, willful Eiko at first challenges, almost shatters, and then, tragically, accepts in order to survive.

A Geisha's credits unfold as the camera slowly pans left over Kyoto's jumble of

buildings and dwellings, the mountains rising beyond with an occasional glimpse of sky. At the end of the credits Mizoguchi cranes down to the city, irrevocably eliminating the small portion of sky with its intimations of hope and freedom. The first shot of the narrative is a low angle focusing on a narrow street in the Gion District. Eiko, suitcase in hand, moves determinedly from the right foreground of the frame, her figure receding into depth of field as she searches for the house of her mother's friend. The contrast of the high-angled pan over the credits with the subsequent low-angled fixed frame and its feeling of confinement, immediately establishes the film's central tension between freedom and constraint.

This tension is expressed through the relationship between Miyoharu and her protégée Eiko, who soon adopts the same

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character in Japanese language ("Miyoe") as her mentor. Mizoguchi often pictures the two women in the same frame, alternately emphasizing their initial differences and emerging similarities. One of the two will often appear in the foreground of the frame, while the other remains in the background, their emotional and psychological connections to one another reinforced by the director's customary use of deep focus. For instance, Eiko is "arranged" by two male servants for her entrance into geisha life in the right middle ground of a shot, while in the left foreground, Miyoharu sits apparently preoccupied, an enigmatic smile the only indication of the conflicting emotions she is experiencing. The progression of such two-shots forms a recurring motif throughout the film, paralleling Eiko's resistance to the inhibitions of the profession she has chosen, with the older woman's growing disenchantment with a way of life that has sustained her adult years.

A Geisha then is not so much about Eiko's initiation into the rites of the geisha, as it is Miyoharu's tragic realization that her life has been formed through continual subjugation to unexamined, unquestioned codes that have circumscribed her freedom and individuality. Eiko's outward rebellion feeds Miyoharu's inner doubts, a process of self-examination Mizoguchi beautifully evokes in a series of shots panning Miyoharu in an opening between the folds of a scrim-like curtain. When Eiko rushes off excitedly to a party a prospective benefactor Kasuda (Seizaburo Kawazu) is giving, Miyoharu is isolated in deep focus, seated between two gauze cloths as she finishes her meal in silent resignation. This exact visual placement recurs when Miyoharu, ostensibly vacationing in Tokyo with Eiko and her would-be patron Kasuda, learns from him the true purpose of the trip, namely, his seduction of Eiko while Miyoharu services an important client in an adjoining compartment. It is this deceit which simultaneously precipitates Eiko's physical attack on Kasuda—filmed in one take, its savage thrust intensified by a stationary frame broken by a violent pan right as they fall to the floor out of camera range—and both women's banishment from their profession in Kyoto.

Throughout *A Geisha* Mizoguchi displays his genius in uniting his thematic concerns with the appropriate formal elements, repeating identical images in varying contexts until the entire film trembles with associations and reverberations. This is sublime filmmaking, the like of which may never be seen again in our lifetime. One need only compare the humorous expectations with which Miyoharu introduces her protégée in the streets of Kyoto near the film's beginning, Mizoguchi's camera gleefully tracking alongside them as they greet one and all, to the unsettling mixture of resignation and thwarted hope that accompanies their walk along those same streets in the closing shot of the film.

A corrosive indictment of a society that consigns its women to varying forms of degradation.

Woman's sacrifice to perpetuate a system of outmoded values in Japanese society is a major theme throughout Mizoguchi's oeuvre, but some measure of his greatness lies in his understanding that men are similarly victims of oppression. The desperate lengths to which Kasuda goes to clinch a vital contract depict the corrupting link between business and sex, as well as the degradation to which human beings will subject themselves in order to survive. One of the most moving moments in the film occurs when a smitten suitor pours saké for Miyoharu, a stunning reversal of accepted ritual that momentarily shocks the geisha but also reveals her client's genuine feeling for her.

Within its 87-minute running time, *A Geisha* encompasses an awesome range and density of emotion. Kyoto's narrow streets, resembling corridors more than thoroughfares, convey the physical and spiritual constraints exerted on the characters. Shots

of incredible beauty linger in the memory, e.g., Eiko breathlessly running across a little bridge anticipating her first day of work, the early morning light sparkling playfully, expectantly on the water below. And there is the old servant woman who bears silent witness to Eiko and Miyoharu's suffering, and who, by the film's end, comes to represent the endurance of all women everywhere.

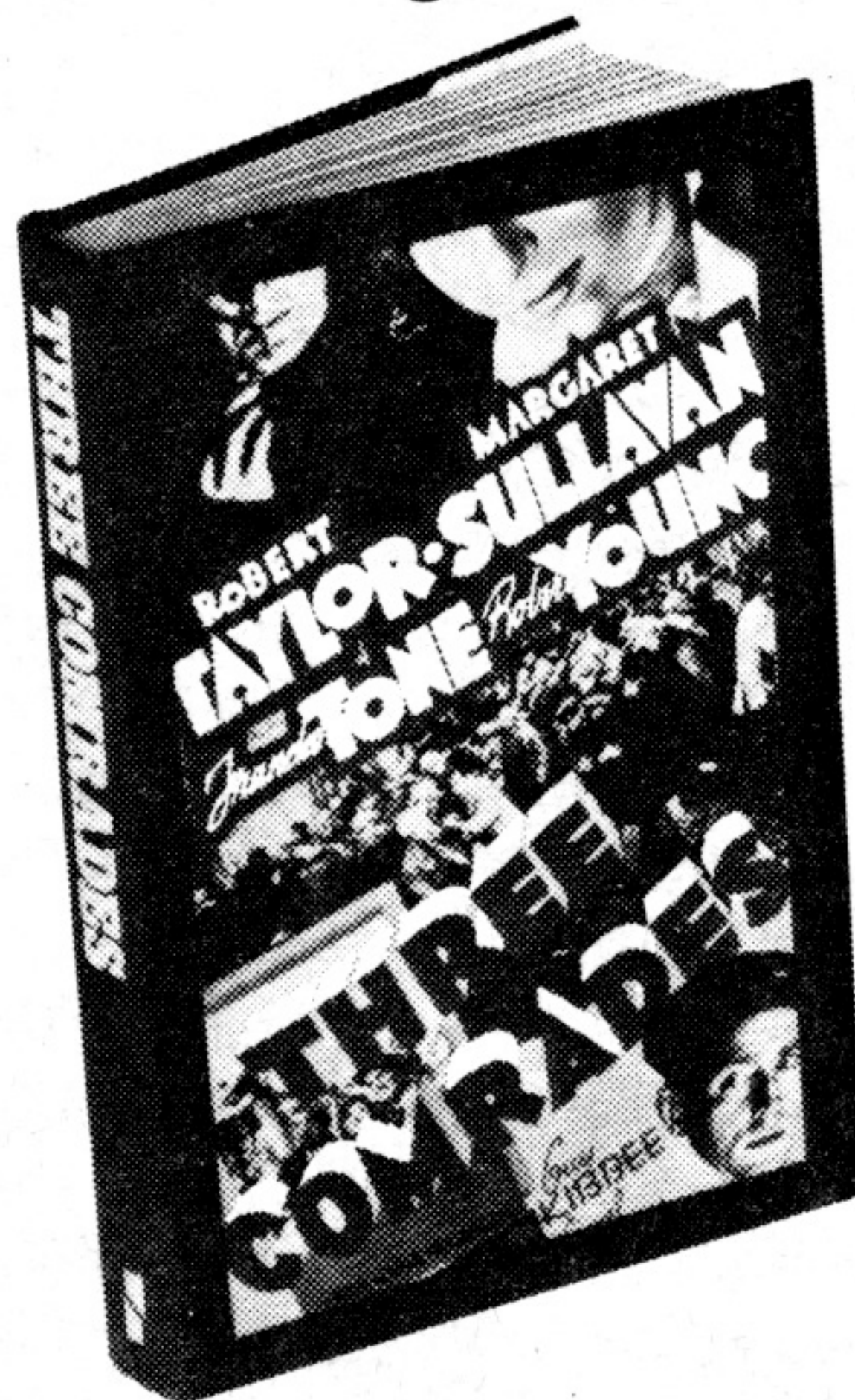
When finally, Miyoharu realistically accepts that she must resume her geisha's life in order to support herself and Eiko, her decision contains equal elements of tragedy and hope. As she prepares to give herself at last to the man whose satisfaction will reinstate both her and Eiko with their proprietress, Miyoharu joins Oharu, the potter's wife in *Ugetsu* and the women of countless other Mizoguchi films in an ultimate act of self-sacrifice. Miyoharu's unwinding of her obi thus becomes at once a submission to destiny and an assumption of grace—and yet another glimpse into the infinite from one of cinema's supreme artists, Kenji Mizoguchi.

George Morris

George Morris is the author of Errol Flynn, Doris Day, and John Garfield, three of the volumes in the Illustrated History of the Movies series. His book on Hollywood melodrama of the 50s will be published late this year.

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