

Document Citation

Title	A geisha
Author(s)	Roger Greenspun
Source	<i>Film Forum (New York)</i>
Date	1978 Jun 01
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Gion bayashi (A geisha), Mizoguchi, Kenji, 1953

FILM FORUM

15 Vandam St., New York, N.Y. 10013
(212) 989-2994

Karen Cooper, Director
Steve Dobi, Manager
Carol Millican, Paul Gotwald,
Asst. Managers

A GEISHA

(1953, 87 mins.) Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi. Screenplay by Yoshikata Yoda. Photography by Kazuo Miyagawa. Music by Ichiro Saito. Japan. In Japanese with English subtitles. A New Yorker Films release.

Cast : Miyoharu..... Michiyo Kogure
Eiko..... Ayako Wakao
Kasuda..... Seizaburo Kawazu
Okimi..... Chieko Naniwa

Thursday - Sunday, June 1-4 and 8-11, 1978 at 7:45 P.M.

Kenji Mizoguchi, the greatest Japanese filmmaker, lived from 1898 to 1956, and he directed more than 90 movies. Fewer than ten have been released here commercially, and only one of those, the beautiful UGETSU MONOGATORI (1953), has achieved much general popularity. Mizoguchi has never enjoyed the American vogue that his contemporaries have -- Akira Kurosawa in the 1950's, and Ysujiro Ozu, posthumously, in the early 1970's. It is past time to rectify this neglect, though I am not sure how it is to happen. Two years ago, when I taught his UTAMARO AND HIS FIVE WOMEN (1946) to a seminar of bright Eastern-college kids, they had trouble not just in handling major themes and images but in understanding something so basic, and perhaps basically exotic, as the room arrangements in 18th-century Japanese domestic architecture. A GEISHA (the film's title, "Gion Bayashi," is usually translated as "Gion Festival Music") may pose fewer difficulties. It is essentially a modern-day movie set in its own time, the early 1950's, and it deals with social questions that should seem current to us indeed.

Miyoharu, a geisha living and working in the Gion district of Kyoto, receives a visit from Eiko, the daughter of a recently dead friend. Eiko begs Miyoharu to sponsor her for training as a geisha entertainer, and, after asking financial help from a prominent Gion madam, the older woman agrees. Eiko learns quickly. But it is the proud and lovely Miyoharu who attracts Kanzaki, an influential government official whom Kasuda, a rich customer of the geisha parlors, needs for help in making an important business deal. On a supposedly innocent pleasure trip to Tokyo planned by the men, Eiko repels Kasuda's advances by painfully biting his lip. She thereby begins earning a reputation for feisty independence. But she also interrupts Kanzaki's suit to Miyoharu -- and thus endangers the business deal, with repercussions reaching back to the Gion madam, who puts the two women out of work until Miyoharu gives in to Kanzaki, as eventually for them both to survive she will have to do.

The story of young Eiko's rebellion against sexual exploitation -- within her own time becoming something of a legend for the Gion geishas -- seems typical of Mizoguchi. But the parallel story of Miyoharu's inevitable submission is equally typical -- and in the long run even more heroic and beautiful. In fact, between the two women, of different generations but not so greatly different age, there is no need to choose. Each provides the other's destiny. Miyoharu, in effect, buys Eiko her independence. And in return, Eiko confers upon Miyoharu the understanding of necessity that becomes the image for her life.

Mizoguchi films his story with a reticence that periodically gives way to a breathtaking virtuosity -- as in the marvelous tracking shot that accompanies the two geishas on their way through the Gion streets to Eiko's first party, or in the calm, graceful, and seemly montage of interiors that sees Miyoharu to Kanzaki's bedroom for what in a more conventional cinema would be her tragic surrender. Sometimes, especially in its willingness to establish the setting for everything, A GEISHA may recall the cinema of Ozu. But Mizoguchi is freer, more openly dramatic, and visually far more ambitious; while even in passages of intimate resignation he never approaches Ozu's feeling of sustained repose. But he offers splendors of a different and very special sort -- from an intense scene between Eiko drunk and Miyoharu sadly sober photographed in extraordinary depth of focus, to a brief sensuous appreciation of the difference between a woman's body balancing the ornate and gorgeous geisha headdress and a woman's body seen in a moment of unselfconscious relaxation.

It would be reasonable to view this movie as at once an ironic study of the geisha tradition and a call to women's liberation. It would be better to view it also as a study in responsibilities, a recognition that everything, even the business of doing business, belongs within a valuable network of human relations. In the films of Mizoguchi, people who suffer deeply are sometimes transformed into the presiding spirits of the places in which they suffer. The result is not transcendence, but a kind of imminence, a presence that expresses where and how a life has been lived. Something like this happens by the end of A GEISHA as Eiko and Miyoharu, both beautiful, between them balancing a past and a future, hurry off to another evening's party, past the bright lanterns and into the soft shadows of the Kyoto twilight.

- Roger Greenspun

Roger Greenspun is film critic for Penthouse and an associate professor of English, teaching film criticism, in Rutgers University.

Partially supported by the NYS Council on the Arts & the National Endowment for the Arts.