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A new-found gem from Kurosawa

by David Chute

NO REGRETS FOR OUR YOUTH. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Written by Eijiro Hisaita and Kurosawa. With Setsuko Hara, Susumu Fujita, Aritake Kono, Haruko Sugimura, and Takashi Shimura. Through Tuesday at the Coolidge Corner; Wednesday through Saturday at the Central Square.

At first, Setsuko Hara doesn't strike one as beautiful. She's taller, more square-shouldered and robust than we expect, and she has a down-to-earth quality. Yet she has an undeniable radiance in her many roles in the late films of Yosujiro Ozu, whose favorite actress she became. As the kindly daughter-in-law in *Tokyo Story* or as the young woman in *Late Spring* who puts off marriage to keep her widowed father company, Hara looks a trifle goosy. But her beauty grows on us, as we learn more about the personality behind it; it's the expressive beauty of an extraordinarily versatile and subtle actress. As captivating as Setsuko Hara is in her films for Ozu, I think it's fair to say that he never found in her — or in the womanly ideal she represents — what Akira Kurosawa had discovered in *No Regrets for Our Youth*, a movie made in 1946 but enjoying its US premiere only now, here in Boston.

The movie begins with material that was common in post-war Japan, and then discovers something in it that must have taken the original audience somewhat by surprise. One assumes, for instance, that historical events at Kyoto University in the '30s, during the rise of Japanese militarism, were well known to most post-war Japanese. Indeed, the opening of *No Regrets* has all the earmarks of anti-militarist, "revisionist" propaganda, part of a wave of movies that proclaimed the heroism of the radicals and pacifists who were denounced as traitors during the war years. For Americans of the post-Vietnam period, the movie's account of professors dismissed from their posts, of students rioting in protest and being set upon and then jailed by police, may seem eerily familiar.

The Setsuko Hara character, Yukie, is the daughter of one of the dismissed professors, and she's torn between two suitors from the ranks of the protesting students. But the political struggle, like the war in *The Deer Hunter*, is finally just an arena for the testing and revelation of character. The man Hara rejects, Aritake Kono, caves in when the authorities crack down; and joins the militarist government. Susumu Fujita, the man Hara eventually settles on, sticks to his chosen path, going first to prison, then underground to continue the struggle. There's an archaic touch of melodrama in the way the personalities of the two men are telegraphed by their appearance. Kono, the weakling, is slender and sheepish; Fujita, the hero, handsome and barrel-chested. (Fujita played the martial-artist hero of Kurosawa's very first feature, the 1943 *Sanshiro Sugata*; he's like an earlier incarnation of Toshiro Mifune.) The basic situation will remind some viewers of the schematic, moralizing romances in 19th century English novels. I'm referring not just to the woman's choice between two contrasting men, but also to the very terms in which she states it: life,

Setsuko Hara and Susumu Fujita

says Hara, would be "peaceful but boring" with Kono and "dazzling but stormy" with Fujita. Actually, the gulf separating us from the sexual attitudes of the Japanese, *circa* 1946, probably isn't much narrower than the one dividing us from our own 19th century. It's immediately clear from the movie, for instance, that Japanese women of this period did not go to universities; they merely studied music or flower arrangement in preparation for the winning of a husband. And that's the only real choice that Setsuko Hara makes in *No Regrets* — she picks a husband. But the woman is always the center of this sort of story — in this movie and in a Trollope or Jane Austen novel. She's the yardstick by which the moral value of the men is measured; she's the judge who confers the final, unequivocal stamp of approval. And, of course, she's also the prize.

The parallel between *No Regrets* and a 19th-century novel breaks down, of course, when Hara finally makes her selection, picking a man that no prudent Victorian (or traditional Japanese) maiden would dream of signing on with. Arranged marriages are the norm in Japan even today, and that Hara is able to make such a choice at all is largely a matter of luck; she has been born into a university family, so that her girlhood companions are all male, and she has a liberal academic for a father, a man who tells her, "You are responsible for what you do." And having tasted something headier, Hara is not to be satisfied by tradi-

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tional female pursuits. After the student uprising has been quelled, and both Kono and Fujita have moved to Tokyo, Hara takes a job as a teacher of flower arrangement. She tells her demure, kimono-clad pupils that the great thing about this ancient craft is that "you're free to express yourself." But in the next moment, her face undergoes a transformation, and she pulls the flowers from the vase and implacably rips off their heads. There is now something in this woman that flower arrangement *can't* express.

The movie has no point of view except Hara's. We see only what she sees and, often, the *way* she sees is distorted by her emotions. Kurosawa, who is sometimes accused of having little insight into, or sympathy for, his female characters, has called *No Regrets* "the first film in which *I* had something to say and in which *my* feelings were used." It's a somewhat curious remark, when you realize that the director never again focused a film so completely on a single character, or marshaled such a dazzling array of "expressionistic" devices to convey one person's states of mind.

Much of what Kurosawa attempts in *No Regrets*, in terms of technique, looks adventurous even now. There are intimations of the jump-cut techniques later employed by New Wave radicals like Alain Resnais and Jean-Luc Godard, although we never perceive Kurosawa's devices as in any way *avant-garde*; he's simply inventing the tools he needs for a specific expressive purpose. For one thing, he's trying to tell, in just two hours, a story that spans 12 years, without omitting anything of importance. He needs to compress time and to convey its passage simultaneously, and he pulls it off.

In Kyoto, in a moment of passionate indecision, Hara is framed against a door in a series of overlapping poses that replace each other like slides projected on a screen. After she's fled to Tokyo, and it takes her the better part of a year to work up courage to visit Fujita, there's a series of shots through the window of the publishing firm he manages. From precisely the same camera angle, but during different seasons, we see Hara approach the storefront, hesitate, then turn away.

When Hara finally (and literally) bumps into Fujita outside his office, she tells him that she "wants to do something in which I can consume myself." She assumes that he has a dangerous secret, that he's working for peace, freedom, whatever. And while he never says a word about his work (not in our hearing, at least) the awareness of it, and of shared danger, is constantly in the air. In a movie theater watching a comedy, Fujita laughs easily; Hara's glance, followed by tears, mixes amazement at his capacity for forgetfulness and pleasure, with respect and love and a pang of sadness at the fragility of their happiness — all this in the space of a few seconds. Kurosawa's methods chart emotional development the way time-lapse photography charts the blossoming of a flower. And Hara's virtuosity matches his, every step of the way.

When first Fujita, then Hara, is arrested, the tone of the film becomes grander, more placid; it takes on an epic quality to capture the final, unexpected chapter in Hara's story. Her decision to bring the ashes of her dead husband, who has died in his jail cell, back to his native village, and to adopt the rugged life of his peasant family, is, in some respects, a very conservative, traditional act; a wife becomes a member of her husband's family and accepts their lot. But it can be hazardous to jump to conclusions about what Kurosawa is up to. For instance, Hara's transformation into a peasant woman, during a period of toil in her in-laws' rice fields, is staged in a stirring style that irresistibly recalls the "socialist realism" of the Russian silent films ("very Dovzhenko," is the way critic Donald Richie describes it). Swathed in rags, hair flying and skin gleaming, Hara is more beautiful than ever. It is very tempting, especially with the film's political background, to take these final scenes at face value and declare this a leftist — actually socialist — movie, a celebration of the peasant masses. Yet how could it be? There isn't an idealized peasant in sight. In marked contrast to the open-minded, educated people Hara is used to, these farmers are bigoted, cruel, and ignorant, and they've been misled by government propaganda that has branded Fujita a spy. After following Hara about and jeering at her (until she seems to hear laughter even in the rustling of the marsh grass) they destroy the rice paddy that cost her so much effort. And Hara wearily starts all over again, setting the crushed plants upright one by one. The visual, rhetorical idioms of social

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