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KENJI MIZOGUCHI

During the next three months NFTA will present a specially imported selection of eight films by the great classical Japanese Film-maker Kenji Mizoguchi, six of them previously unseen here.

"In Mizoguchi, particularly in the postwar Films, we find a balance, rare in Japanese cinema, between the classic poles of the traditional - the acceptance of Feudal values, the affirmation of the home, the joy of submitting to restraint; and the individual - the impatience with restraint, the criticism of all traditional values, the joy of overcoming obstacles, of enlarging horizons." (Donald Richie).

Mizoguchi's Films are not overt criticisms of society; his characters rarely take a stand against the social system. Instead of manipulating response in a certain direction he appears to show the way things are; it is by creating a meticulous image of a period and its social structure that he indicates constricting social pressures and achieves a subtle critical thrust.

As an eminent director Mizoguchi could choose his subjects. His themes tended to be constant but he continually changed the context while employing recurring visual motifs, e.g.; flowing water as an image of the passage of time and life, one of the central figures of Japanese poetry, literature and art.

He had a rare and refined 'painter's eye' and always insisted upon the importance of environment to his characters, using close-ups very sparingly. Remarkably fluid yet unobtrusive camera movements, often in long 'takes', constantly shift the point of focus with a precision equivalent to pointed editing. At the same time he is able to create atmosphere by allowing the audience a continuing 'complete view' of the scene which sharp cutting tends to destroy for the sake of dramatic effect.

"When he turned to colour, Mizoguchi gained a dimension which, unhappily, was only explored in two films, "Yang-Kwei-Fei", and "Shin Heike Mongatari"; nevertheless, they suggest he might have been one of the cinema's supreme colourists" (John Gillet).

SISTERS OF THE GION (1936) The sisters are two geisha from the Gion district of Kyoto: one is flighty and ambitious, the other embodies all the virtues of the "traditional" geisha. In what has been described as the best pre-war Japanese Sound Film, Mizoguchi builds up a lively, critical portrait of geisha society (with its quest for money and perennial jealousies) set against a meticulously realised background of little alleys, tea-houses and the sights and sounds of regional life. With Yoko Umemura, Isuzu Yamada.

STORY OF THE LAST CHRYSANTHEMUM (1934) A major Mizoguchi with an elaborate Kabuki theatre setting ideally designed for his famous long tracking shots. A young actor (not yet fully fledged in his art) falls in love with a mysterious girl and sets off a series of dramatic events. Mizoguchi's magisterial, sensual direction gives the love affair great depth, not least in the concluding scenes where the river festivities ironically counterpoint the final plot twist. With: Shotaro Hanayagi, Kakuko Mori.

MADAME MUSASHINO (1951) The tragic fate of women in all epochs was one of Mizoguchi's major pre-occupations; in this modern subject, he concentrates on a gentle, sensitive married woman who falls in love with her cousin, a situation which leads to betrayal and suicide. Using some of his favourite actors, Mizoguchi constructs a tightly knit study of adultery and thwarted passions, shot through with marvellous lyrical images. With: Kinuyo Tanaka, Masaguki Mori.

LIFE OF O-HARU (1952) Mizoguchi's hyper-sensitive response to period subjects and his skill in delineating female characters give O-Haru the scope and density of a major novel. Against a meticulously realised background of Feudal Japan, we follow the progress of the heroine from courtesan to geisha and then to lonely beggar: memorable scenes include her first passionate tryst, a suicide attempt in a bamboo forest and the raucous activities of the geisha house. Even for Mizoguchi, the virtuoso camerawork in the forest is outstanding, equalled only by his feeling for costuming and decor. With: Kinuyo Tanaka, Toshiro Mifune.

UWASA NO ONNA (1954) "The Crucified Woman" (or "Woman of Rumour") is set in an exotic bordello, where the "madame's" daughter falls in love with a young doctor who is also loved by the mother. Unsensational and cool in treatment it shows Mizoguchi's compassionate response to female characters; and the infinitely varied life and bustle of the bordello is atmospherically conveyed by the great Miyagawa, who invariably did his best work for Mizoguchi. With: Kinuyo Tanaka, Yoshiko Kuga.

SHANSHO DAYO (1954) "The Bailiff Shansho" is not only a classic of World Cinema but is probably Mizoguchi's most atmospheric period piece. Set in 11th century Japan, its action-packed narrative combines barbaric violence (the corrupt opulence of Sansho's court) with a family story of great depth and tenderness. Particularly unforgettable are the kidnapping scenes near the beginning and the moving climax showing the son's search for his mother on the seashore caught by Miyagawa's camera in a series of high sweeping shots. With: Kinuyo Tanaka, Yoshiaki Hanayagi.

We plan to screen "Shin Heike Monogatari" (1955) and "Princess Yang Kwei Fei" (1955) lat in June or July