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THE LIFE OF O-HARU

Japan, 1952

Original title: SAIKAKU ICHIDAI ONNA; THE LIFE OF A WOMAN BY SAIKAKU

Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi

Scenario by Yoshikata Yoda and Mizoguchi, based on Ihara Saikaku's

KOSHUKU ICHIDAI ONNA; THE LIFE OF AN AMOROUS WOMAN, 1686

Camera: Hirano Yoshima and Kono Yoshima

Decors: Hiroshi Mizutani

Music: Ichiro Saito

Historical Adviser: Isamu Yoshi

Production company: Shintôhō

133 minutes. US distribution by New Yorker Films

CAST: Kinuyo Tanaka (O-Haru Okui)

Toshiro Mifune (Katsunosuke, retainer to Lord Kikukoji)

Eitaro Shindo (merchant)

and Ichiro Sugai, Toshiko Yanane, Yuriko Hamada, Eijiro Yanagi,

Junichi Uno, Takoshi Shimura, Chieko Higashiyama, Masao Mishima,

Sadako Sawamura

THE LIFE OF O-HARU was awarded the Silver Lion at the 1952 Venice Film Festival; Mizoguchi shared the prize for Best Direction with John Ford (for THE QUIET MAN)

Andrew Sarris' review of May 28, 1964 in the VILLAGE VOICE was the only non trade-paper notice given to the film Europeans consider Mizoguchi's masterwork at the time of its initial commercial release:

"The late Kenji Mizoguchi's LIFE OF O-HARU closed a few weeks ago at the Toho after an ignominiously unprofitable run, and I have been brooding about that fact ever since. (It is scant consolation that the late James Agee, for all his retrospective prestige, was unable to keep Carl Dreyer's DAY OF WRATH alive in an art house for more than a week.) Most of the reviewers were reasonably, if damningly, respectful of O-HARU, and I must admit that the film's severest detractors are not entirely in error when they complain about the film's slow pace. Even the infidels who snort 'soap opera' are not entirely lacking in plausible arguments.

To synopsise O-HARU is to condemn it. Every disaster known to woman befalls our eponymous heroine. Her first lover is beheaded for class presumption; O-Haru and her family are exiled. She becomes a royal concubine, only to have her child taken from her at birth by the jealous, infertile wife of the ruler. Sold by her parents to a house of ill repute, she is cheated by a counterfeiter. When O-Haru is fortunate enough to find a loving husband, he is almost immediately murdered by bandits. Retiring to a monastery, she is hounded by a lecherous creditor; compromised, humiliated, expelled. As an aging prostitute she is pointed up to scorn by a Buddhist priest lecturing his disciples on the ultimate folly of a life of pleasure. Just one misfortune after another. Yet O-Haru endures. She sees her son one last time, and then wanders into eternity as a street singer, a pagoda-shaped hat forming her last silhouette. In the last frames of the film O-Haru pauses, turns to look at a distant pagoda, her spatial and spiritual correlative, and passes off the screen while the pagoda remains.

From the first frame of O-HARU to the last, one is aware of sublime directional purpose. To understand the full meaning of a Mizoguchi film is to understand the art of direction as a manner of looking at the world rather than as a means of changing it. There is not much that even the greatest director can do with a face or a tree or a river or a sunset beyond determining his personal angle and distance, rhythm and duration. With Mizoguchi's first tracking of O-Haru weaving and bobbing across a licentious world to a religious temple, we are in the presence of an awesome parable of womankind.

No director in the history of cinema has so completely identified with the point of view of the woman. No, not even Ingmar Bergman. In fact, Bergman is somewhat ambivalent about the female role. It is one thing to worship woman's life force; it is quite another to identify such worship, as Mizoguchi does, as an ingenious rationalization of woman's servitude to man's aesthetic desires. One of the most scathing episodes in O-HARU concerns a beauty contest set up to select a king's concubine. This is the darker side of the Cinderella legend, the feudal arrogance of the male seeking the lucky foot of his life companion, his soulless mate.

Throughout his long, eminently commercial career Mizoguchi kept returning to the theme of the geisha in both ancient and modern times. It is so bizarre to find a male artist of the first rank persistently agitating for the rights of women that there is a tendency to misread the cinema of Mizoguchi. Those who saw the staggering SANSHO THE BAILIFF at last year's New York Film Festival can readily confirm that there is nothing pathological about Mizoguchi's concern with the exploitation of women. For Mizoguchi the rights of women are merely a logical extension of the rights of man. It is difficult to think of any philosopher from Aristotle to Zarathustra capable of such logic."