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Princess Yang Kwei Fei



Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi. *Princess Yang Kwei Fei* is the next-to-last in the quintet of historical masterpieces—including *The Life of Oharu*, *Ugetsu*, *Sansho the Bailiff*, and *The Taira Clan Saga*—that Kenji Mizoguchi made in the early fifties. Set in Eighth Century China, it unfolds the tragic story of a love affair between a servant girl and Huan Tsuang, the last great emperor of the T'ang Dynasty.

Princess Yang Kwei Fei is one of the most beautiful love stories ever put on film. But, as always in Mizoguchi, this is only half the story. As a director of historical subjects, Mizoguchi is equalled only by America's John Ford and Italy's Roberto Rossellini. The assuredness with which he brings sweeping historical forces into the most personal dramas is a trademark of one of the world's great filmmakers.

The film's opening shot swivels majestically to place its romance firmly within deep, shadowy corridors of power. We see the aged Emperor, querulous, arthritic, stripped of power by his own son. Grieving before a statue of his lost love, he remembers. . .

Huan Tsuang is a musician, an artist—in fact, he is far too sensitive to be a very good emperor. Mourning over the death of his first wife, he prefers playing his lute under the plum trees to handling affairs of state. His alarmed ministers search far and wide for a woman to distract his heart, and one finally succeeds: an obscure young commoner named Yu-huan, later dubbed Yang Kwei Fei.

'We are presented with a fairy tale, but one in which Cinderella and Prince Charming

cannot be excluded from the real world. Court intrigue—intricate, intransigent—breaks the lover's spell. Kwei Fei's family, the grasping Yangs, use her good fortune to gain good positions, through which they soon corrupt the court. The populace becomes restless and rebellious. An ambitious general seizes the opportunity to start a military revolt.

The film descends into a torchlit night-world of chaos and violence as mutiny spreads and statesmen murder each other madly in dark corners. The Emperor is powerless; only the death of all the Yangs will appease the populace.

There may be more moving scenes in the history of cinema than the execution of Yang Kwei Fei, but there certainly are not many. Standing before an isolated, leafless tree, the princess gives her own white scarf for the hangman to use. She slowly removes her jacket, and the camera follows the train of her gown as it trails across the earth. Her jewels drop like tears. . .

The film ends with a mystical embrace from beyond the grave. The ghostly laughter that echoes on the soundtrack in the final shot has been called "one of the most chillingly beautiful moments in all cinema" (Roger Greenspun, *The New York Times*). Finally, no description of *Princess Yang Kwei Fei* would be complete without mentioning its use of color, which is still unsurpassed. The film's costumes and settings are lovingly enriched with soft pastels—maroons, beiges, lavenders, indescribable tints that seem never to have existed before—which create an impression of almost un-

earthly beauty.

Princess Yang Kwei Fei (Yokichi) 1955.
Color. 91 minutes.