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When a Woman Ascends the Stairs

1960

WHEN A WOMAN ASCENDS THE STAIRS

(ONNA GA KAIDAN O AGARU TOKI), 1960, 110 min., b/w., CinemaScope

Production: Toho Company **Screenplay:** Ryuzo Kikushima

Cinematography: Masao Tamai **Art**

Direction: Satoshi Chuko **Music:** Toshiro Mayuzumi

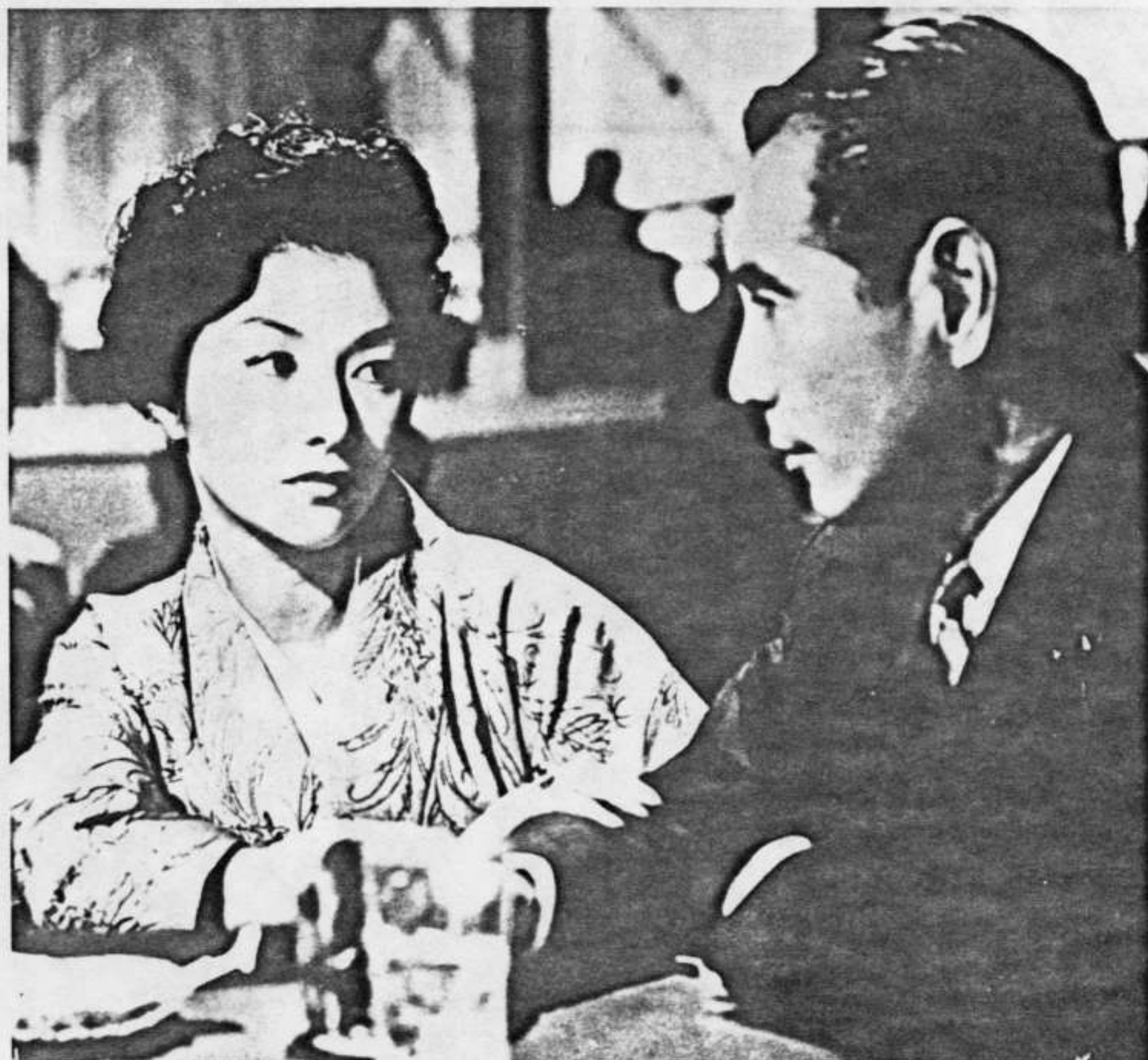
Cast: Hideko Takamine, Masayuki Mori, Reiko Dan, Tatsuya Nakadai, Daisuke Kato, Ganjiro Nakamura, Eitaro Ozawa, Keiko Awaji et al.

A young widow with no children, Keiko Yashiro (Takamine), works as a bar madame in Tokyo's exclusive Ginza nightclub district. Her wealthiest customer, Minobe (Ozawa), has been seduced by a girl who used to work for Keiko, Yuri (Awaji), and has set the rival up with her own bar. The owner of Keiko's bar complains that she should have slept with Minobe to keep the profits up. But Keiko, much to the admiration of her manager, Komatsu (Nakadai), has managed to avoid affairs in this sordid business for five years, remaining faithful to the memory of her dead

husband and providing for her mother and divorced brother, who has a handicapped child. While Yuri dies in a suicide "attempt" intended to fend off her creditors, Keiko rejects the advances of another rich customer, Goda (Nakamura), who gives his money to another of Keiko's hostesses, Junko (Dan), to set her up with her own bar instead. Keiko falls ill with gastric ulcers but thinks her future is assured when her customer Sekine (Kato) proposes to her. He turns out to be poor, mentally unbalanced and already married. She tries to raise money for her own bar by getting subscriptions from all her customers, but she succumbs to the most attractive among them, Fujisaki (Mori), only to learn he is leaving Tokyo. Komatsu berates her for the one-night stand, then proposes, then leaves when she rejects him. Keiko resumes her life of climbing the stairs to a bar every night, but not before returning Fujisaki's stock certificates to his wife.

Having celebrated the decline of the institution of the geisha in such films as *Flowing*, in this film Naruse turns his attention to the modern phenomenon that has replaced the geisha: the bar hostess. Again his heroine, here played by Hideko Takamine, is atypically high-minded and impractical, and because of these qualities throws the sordidness of the world she lives in into sharp relief. But in the bar world the vestiges of traditional values seen among the fifties' geisha have vanished: here there is no loyalty whatsoever, and the only skill the women have is that of flattering men to take their money. The stakes are high, and failures come quicker: Yuri dies in a desperate error, Keiko as she approaches age thirty knows she cannot sell only her good looks much longer. Naruse spares no detail of sleaziness among the characters that surround Keiko: her boss's brutality is underlined by the fact that he is a non-Japanese Asian, Keiko's own family go after her like leeches, when Yuri dies the first creditor to appear is Minobe's own representative, the moment Junko finds herself alone with one of Keiko's customers she takes advantage of him, Komatsu puts Keiko on a pedestal while toying with as many women as he can. Keiko's voice-over narration at first appears to be omniscient, but the accumulation of all these details and characterizations around her culminate in a feeling of horror that she, resuming her stair-climbing at the end, does not see. --

Rudie Bock



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