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## ALONE ON THE PACIFIC

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THE RECONSTRUCTION OF a single-handed voyage from Osaka to San Francisco (the original event was in 1962) seems an unlikely choice for anything but a formal documentary film. As one might expect, however, Ichikawa's *Alone on the Pacific* (Connoisseur) makes a far richer meal of it than this. In his hands, the inevitable flashbacks to the early difficulties undergone on land by the would-be voyager, Horie, become as vital to the film's theme as is the struggle with the sea itself. The impersonal resistance of the Pacific, in fact, is shown to

be a relatively manageable challenge after the obstructive disinterest, and even hostility, expressed by Horie's family and countrymen.

In calmly going ahead with his plan despite all opposition, he is escaping as much from human defeatism as from the crushing uniformity of big city life that Ichikawa summarises so superbly with a handful of telephoto shots. Although the piled cars and teeming faces are there at the end of the voyage as at the beginning, the escapist has successfully asserted his right to independence of their tyranny. Their echo summons him in the form of a telephone call from his family, but he sleeps on undisturbed.

Ichikawa is concerned here, as usual, with the fine distinction between individualism and self-centredness. Without belittling his hero's achievement, he affectionately emphasises Horie's clumsy and boorish qualities—particularly with his graceless acceptance of the parting gifts from his mother and sister. The youth nearly blows himself up by cooking with beer, he goes swimming without noticing a shark, and he gets himself knocked out like a silent comedy clown, while his tears over a sentimental pop-tune, or his modest retirement below deck to change his pants when nothing is in view but the sea, demonstrate amiably enough that he is no more than fallibly, averagely, human.

But his parade of mistakes, misjudgments, and gentle idiocies goes deeper than slapstick, as Ichikawa signposts in the scenes when Horie talks to himself—a visible, tangible, and independent self. As the voyager worries and argues over the course he is following, we grow to realise the particularly personal value of his splendid isolation. His journey is across weaknesses and doubts—and at its close the voyager reclines exhausted in an upholstered armchair against a wall of blazing, clinical whiteness. Clear links, then, with for example *Fires on the Plain* and *An Actor's Revenge*, although neither the doomed, tottering soldier and his resistance to cannibalism, nor the sensitive Yuki and his

tragic resignation to the need for murder, have the robust resilience of the introspective sailor who seems indestructible even when swamped by the fiercest of typhoons. Of all Ichikawa's self-questioning heroes, Horie always manages to look as if he'll produce the right answers somehow.

One need hardly mention that the film is, of course, beautifully made. What is particularly striking is the effortlessness of it all, the fluency with which Ichikawa describes each stage of the voyage. He films from all angles, including helicopter shots from above and underwater shots from below, yet there is never a false note—not even in the cabin scenes which presumably were shot in a studio. For all the storm sequences, what is conveyed most strongly and typically by Yoshihiro Yamazaki's brilliant photography is a dream-like sense of peace, with the tiny boat coasting along in sunlight while its passenger fiddles with a kettle or hangs his washing out to dry. By comparison, the flashbacks have a visible gloom, filmed in the dark recesses of the father's factory or the claustrophobic shadows of the family home—although these are perhaps the scenes that Ichikawa handles best, magnificently served as he is by Natto Wada's writing of dialogue.

The gruffly uncomprehending father who finally abandons all effort even to speak to the son who shows no interest in spare car parts, the grumbling mother who accompanies each meal with a protracted whine about the strong probability of catastrophe and yet produces some crumpled money from her apron to help the boy on his way, and the enigmatic dead-pan sister who makes the sudden and surprising comment to the press that she knew her brother would make it all along—these are the characters who bring us closer to Horie than could be accomplished by his own commentary alone. And Ichikawa sets them out across his vast screen with unfaltering visual flair; in particular the scenes at the workshop, beginning with an oppressive overhead shot, show father and son drifting further and further apart until they are at opposite sides of the frame; while the arguments around the table at home are a lesson in what can be done with deep-focus staging. If *Alone on the Pacific* makes no claim to be Ichikawa's greatest film, it remains a delightful demonstration of the director's extraordinary versatility.

PHILIP STRICK

"ALONE ON THE PACIFIC": YUJIRO ISHIHARA.

