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A GEISHA - 1953
(GIONBAYASHI)

Director	Kenji Mizoguchi
Screenplay	Yoshikata Yoda
After a story by	Matsutaro Kawaguchi
Photography	Kazuo Miyagawa
Assistant Director	Mitsuo Hirotsu
Music	Ichiro Saito
Editor	Mitsuzo Miyata
Art Supervisor	Kazumi Koike

Running time: 87 minutes

Cast

Miyoharu	MICHIYO KOGURE
Eiko	AYAKO WAKAO
Kusuda	SEIZABURO KAWAZU
Okimi	CHIEKO NANIWA
Sawamoto	EITARO SHINDO
Kanzaki	MIKIO KOSHIBA
Saeki	ICHIRO SUGAI
Ogawa	HARUO TANAKA



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A GEISHA

Background

Until recently, Kenji Mizoguchi's 1953 classic A GEISHA was completely unknown in the United States: it first reached this country in the spring of 1976 as part of the Pacific Film Archive's Mizoguchi retrospective. There it was recognized as a key work of the latter part of the director's career, coming, as it did, between UGETSU and SANSHO THE BAILIFF, both long considered to be among the masterpieces of the world cinema. A GEISHA operates simultaneously on several levels - as Mizoguchi's most fully realized depiction of the geisha life that fascinated him, as a remarkable demonstration of the rise of feminism in post-War Japan, and above all, as an intimate portrait of the friendship between two women. For actress Ayako Wakao (Eiko), it is a particularly significant work, demonstrating beyond question her acute acting ability, which was sadly neglected for most of her career.

Synopsis

A young man who has been misusing his family's money on account of the popular and successful geisha Miyoharu (Michiyo Kogure) comes to ask her to marry him. Instead, she sends him back to his parents in the belief that he will benefit from having to deal with his dishonesty.

A young woman named Eiko (Ayako Wakao) arrives to see Miyoharu and tells her that she wishes to be trained as a maiko, a juvenile geisha. Her mother, a close friend of Miyoharu's, has died recently, and Eiko prefers to become a geisha under Miyoharu's protection rather than remaining under the bad influence of her uncle. Miyoharu approaches Eiko's father to ask him to underwrite the cost of Eiko's training to be a geisha, but he refuses flatly. Instead, Miyoharu undertakes to finance the training by herself, and after a year of instruction in music and the arts at the geisha school of Kyoto's Gion District, Eiko shows exceptional promise as a maiko. To pay the expenses of Eiko's debut, Miyoharu borrows 300,000 yen from Okimi (Chieko Naniwa), the proprietress of a famed "tea-house" of the Gion District.

Eiko assumes the name of Miyoe, and on the night of her debut, she and Miyoharu are joined by three businessmen, including Mr. Kusuda (Seizaburo Kawazu), managing director of a large company. He is very interested in Eiko and mentions the possibility of his becoming her "patron", but Eiko does not share his interest. During a conversation with Okimi, after mentioning that she, too, would not like to have a patron whom she does not genuinely love, Miyoharu learns that the money borrowed for Eiko's debut did not come from Okimi's savings, but from Kusuda himself.

Kusuda invites Miyoharu and Eiko to join him on a business trip to Tokyo. At the hotel he arranges for Miyoharu to be alone with Kanzaki (Mikio Koshihara),

an important government official. Kusuda stays with Eiko, but when he tries to force himself on her, she bites him severely on the lip. Okimi is angered when she hears of the incident, not only on account of Eiko's violent reaction, but also because Miyoharu had refused to give herself to Kanzaki. She orders Miyoharu to give in to Kanzaki, and to enforce her demand she tells the owners of the other Kyoto tea-houses not to admit the two renegade geishas to their parties, thus effectively putting them out of business. Kanzaki comes to visit and taunts Miyoharu for her "coldness". Eiko's father also comes to visit, seeking money. Miyoharu gives him some of their valuables and sends him away, chiding him for trying to get money from his daughter when he wouldn't underwrite the cost of her training.

Okimi phones Miyoharu and tells her that Eiko has come to her with the idea of giving herself to Kanzaki, thereby settling the two geishas' differences with Okimi. Miyoharu begs Okimi to send Eiko home, and she herself goes to spend the night with Kanzaki.

When Miyoharu returns home, Eiko criticizes her for giving in for her sake. Eiko says that if being a maiko means sleeping with men on demand, then she would rather not be a geisha at all. Miyoharu replies that she herself is already used to being part prostitute, but Eiko should remain clean and decent if possible.