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(Note: There will be coffee and opportunity for informal discussion of this film after the showing at the Channing-Murray Foundation. All Film Society Members are cordially invited.)

THE FILM SOCIETY
of the University of Illinois
presents:

November 3, 1965

SANSHO DAYU
(Sansho the Bailiff)
Japan - 1954

A Daiei film.
Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi.
Screenplay by Fuki Yahiro and Yoshikata Yoda, based on a novel by Ogai Mori.
Music by Fumio Hayasaka; Photography by Kezuo Miyogawa.

Many a critic of Japanese film has ranked Kenji Mizoguchi as the greatest of Japanese directors. In the long run, such rankings make very little sense. The fact of the matter is that there are a number of superb Japanese directors--Ozu, Naruse, Kinoshita, Ichikawa, and more;--that Mizoguchi excels in the production of certain kinds of films; and that there are good reasons to prefer him to the others at certain things; that, in spite of the work of these men, Japanese film still means only Kurosawa to the majority of Americans. There is no need to denigrate Kurosawa, but it is a shame that his popularity blocks recognition of other equally fine, and in some ways superior, talents.

Kenji Mizoguchi was born in 1898 and died in 1956, after a career which produced at least 85 feature films. He began work as a painter, studied Western art, and worked as a newspaper cartoonist as a young man. He began film work as an actor, but shortly turned to direction.

His pre-WWII films, among the best Japanese films of the period, are mostly contemporary stories of the difficulties of women in the rapidly industrializing Japanese society. These films feature excellent naturalistic acting, a probing sympathy for the problems of his feminine characters, and an unobtrusive but strong pictorial control. During the war years, he (and all other directors) were asked to produce films glorifying the war effort. But his disgust with the war lords and with the whole authoritarian regime would not permit him to pursue that work. He turned instead to the direction of period pieces, a type of film he had not tried before. In these films he could, ostensibly, ignore the war, providing good entertainment only. But "period films" also allowed him to imply criticisms of the current regime: he could, for instance, safely picture the samurai as brutal, and could safely depict the ravages of war and the oppression of innocent peasants and women.

After the war he continued to make "period films," but also produced an equal number of contemporary films, usually about the collapse of the family system or the exploitation of prostitutes. In this post-war work all the themes and techniques of his former films come to maturity in a brilliant succession of films: THE LIFE OF O-HARU, COURTESAN (1951); UGETSU (1952); SANSHO THE BAILIFF (1954); CHICKAMATSU MONAGATARI (The Crucified Lovers-1954); TALES OF THE TIARA CLAN (1955); THE EMPRESS YANG KWEI-FEI (1955); STREET OF SHAME (1956); WOMEN OF THE NIGHT (1956).

SANSHO THE BAILIFF won a prize at Venice in 1954, but was not then distributed in America. Mizogucki was given a retrospective by the Cinamatheque Francais in 1961. From then on his prestige mounted. SANSHO was shown at the 1963 New York Film Festival and was there the hit of the show. It may in time come to replace UGETSU as Mizoguchi's best-known work.

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UGETSU (Film Society '63-65) provides a reasonably well-known illustration of Mizoguchi's talents. Those who have seen the film will recall that the plot combines criticism of both commercialism and war, an idyllic portrayal of village family life; the exploitation of women, and the survival of human affection in a world of constant oppression, destruction, and venality. The film blends, in an uncannily coherent way, the supernatural and the naturalistic, a remarkably beautiful photography and an unflinching presentation of ugliness--rape, murder, squalor, wanton destruction.

The same elements combine in SANSHO THE BAILIFF, perhaps even more effectively. The film is based on an old Japanese legend, well-known to any Japanese audience. (This surely accounts for a certain elliptical quality in the narrative movement of the film: the audience knows what is going on and doesn't need to be told.) A nobleman is banished for attempting to aid the peasantry, and he sends his wife and children ahead of him into exile. The children are stolen from their mother and sold into slavery. They come to maturity as slaves to the brutal Bailiff Sansho. Memories of their father and mother sustain them, but they come to realize that they too are turning brutal under the circumstances of their slavery. When they learn that their mother may still be alive, they determine to escape. The brother becomes a samurai and successfully overthrows the Bailiff. But he then learns that his sister has meanwhile committed suicide. He frees the slaves, renounces his new position as governor, and goes in search of his mother. Their reunion is the climax and end of the film. This plot is divided into five clearly separated sections: the voyage into exile; the enslavement; the children ten years later; their remembrance of their father's instruction and their escape; the overthrow of Sansho and the reunion with the mother.

The photography (b the same man that photographed RASHOMON) is superb throughout. Particularly striking are the early journey through the forest and the subsequent kidnapping. Visual elements from the early sections of the film recur later with great effect. The acting style shifts imperceptably from extreme stylization (for instance, the brother begging to see the provincial governor in the latter part of the film) to direct naturalism (the branding of a slave who attempted to escape from Sansho). Supernatural elements weave in and out of the film without any self-consciousness. The film is all-at-once legend, history, and discussion of serious and still current social problems. The styles appropriate to each type of film are blended so well that there is never any feeling of inappropriateness.

At a recent showing of this film in Chicago, the discussion afterwards centered on the film's apparent "social criticism." A Japanese critic present objected, "No, only old Japanese legend." I suspect that both are correct interpretations and that there is something in the conflation of the two that would be instructive for us in the West if we could grasp it. I am still puzzled by the sister's suicide. It seems, on the face of it, so pointless and unnecessary. But then what could a young woman without family or protection hope for in Japan at that time (or even in this time)? Only slavery or whoredom. Life is over for the girl, and she must feel herself only a burden on her brother, who might succeed in winning the small victory over Sansho, but then might not. And why does the brother renounce his position at the end of the film? He has reached what looks like an initial victory, but he doesn't even try to make his reforms permanent. The despair in this film is as overwhelming as its great beauty.

RWA

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