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ITALY AND JAPAN SEND TWO TOP SCREEN DRAMAS

Last year's notable foreign film imports were slim, but this year promises to be considerably more productive. Already this early in the year we have two absorbing, above-average pictures which arrived in local art houses over the week end.

Both "Vitelloni" (Italian) which opened at the Crest and Sunset and "Street of Shame" (Japanese) at the Vagabond are brightly acted and directed and not the sort of thing you are apt to see on the late-late movie on television.

Each have sharp shock values to jolt the viewer, but neither depends on these elements for their success.

'Street of Shame' Spotlights Machiko as Trollop

In a radical departure from her geisha-girl portrayal in "Teahouse of the August Moon," Machiko Kyo plays a hard-boiled, Americanized little trollop with neither scruples nor remorse in "Street of Shame." It is directed by Kenji Mizoguchi, who also made "Ugetsu."

This expertly photographed picturization of the seamier side of life in Tokyo's infamous Yoshiwara district of prostitution is no cheap, sensationalized thriller. The film scathingly indicts the brothel owners who have, until recently, successfully lobbied against a ban on the love-for-sale girls, and presents a heart-breaking account of these women's shattered lives.

The picture, made last year, caused such a sensation in Japan that it had a direct and almost immediate influence on the Japanese Diet. The lawmakers finally, after 500 years, banned the Yoshiwara, effective this April 1. I noted a news story from Tokyo the other day in which the hundreds of girls employed in the district sought \$500 severance pay from the brothel owners!

Machiko is one of five girls on whom the story centers. All work in "Dreamland," the house that is not a home.

Aiko Mimasu is a fortyish widow who sells herself to support her son through school.

Ayako Wako is a good-looking, young, lying schemer. She works one susceptible customer for thousands of extra dollars. After he has embezzled from his employer in the belief that he is buying up her debts so that she can marry him, she spurns him to open her own dry goods business.

Michiyo Kogure, by special dispensation from the owner, does not live in the house. She stays in a rented room with a tubercular baby and worthless husband, who finally attempts to hang himself. Hiroko Machida is a not-very-attractive peasant girl who has a lover in the country whom she hopes to marry.

Machiko's most dramatic scene comes in an encounter with her aging father who attempts to persuade her to leave the house. But unlike most top American femme stars, who would be unwilling to share the spotlight, she divides the footage and attention about equally with the other quartet of girls on whom the story centers.