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A-GE-MAN -- TALES OF A GOLDEN GEISHA

By

Juzo Itami

For further information contact:

Paul L. Sandberg
ITAMI FILMS INC.
335 North Maple Drive, suite 352
Beverly Hills, CA 90210
Tel: (213) 285-6244
Fax: (213) 285-6089

A-Ge-Man -- Tales of a Golden Geisha
Credits

AN ITAMI FILMS INC. PRODUCTION

Written and Directed by: JUZO ITAMI

Produced by YASUSHI TAMAOKI and JUZO ITAMI

Co-Producer: SEIGO HOSOGOE

Executive Producers: YUKUO TAKENAKA, NIGEL SINCLAIR, PAUL L. SANDBERG

Produced in cooperation with SEIGO HOSOGOE OFFICE

The Cast

Nayoko: NOBUKO MIYAMOTO

Mondo Suzuki: MASAHIKO TSUGAWA

Zenbu Okura: SHOGO SHIMADA

Chijiwa: HIDEJI OTAKI

Eiko: MITSUKO

Tsurumaru: KAZUO KITAMURA

Inukai: AKIRA TAKARADA

Buddhist Bishop: RYUNOSUKE KANEDA

Buddhist Bishop's Mother: ATSUKO ICHINOMIYA

Kotobuki: ISAO HASHIZUME

Nayoko's Foster Mother: KIN SUGAI

Nayoko's Foster Father: KAN YANAGIYA

Madam Geisha: KAZUYO MITA

Mondo's Young Girlfriend: YORIKO DOGUCHI

Waitress: MAIKO MINAMI

Fur Shop Proprietress: HARUNA TAKASE

Kiyoka, a Geisha: FUKUMI KURODA

Proprietress of Restaurant Tankuma: TOKUKO SUGIYAMA

Proprietress of Restaurant Shin-Kamechiyo: HIROKO SEKI

Prime Minister: EIJIRO TONO

Buddhist Bishop's Wife: MICHIO YOKOYAMA

Hiruta: SEN YANO

Buddhist Priest: HARUKAZU KITAMI

Buddhist Priest: AKIRA KUBO

Kikunojo, a Kabuki Actor: YOSHIHIRO KATO

Dance Teacher: KIYOKATA SARUWAKA

Boutique Proprietress: AKARI UCHIDA

Chaperone: MIHOKO SHIBATA

Executioner: MANSAKU FUWA
Private Detective: KOICHI UEDA
Doctor: SHINOBU OSHIZAKA

The Crew

Director of Photography: ZENKO YAMAZAKI (J.S.C.)
Lighting Director: MATSUSAKU KATO
Sound Mixer: OSAMU ONODERA
Set Designer: SHUJI NAKAMURA
Music: TOSHIYUKI HONDA
Editing: AKIRA SUZUKI
Music Producer: NAOKI TACHIKAWA
Casting Director: KOZABURO SASAOKA
Graphic Design: KENICHI SAMURA
Chief Assistant Director: NOBUHIRO KUBOTA
Key Grip: YASUO OCHIAI
Set Decorator: TERU YAMAZAKI
Script Supervisor: SHOKO HORIKITA
Wardrobe Stylist: EMIKO KOAI
Kimono Consultant: REIKO YAMADA
Dance Instructor: SEIZABURO SARUWAKA
Production Manager: TAKASHI KAWASAKI
Assistant Directors: HISASHI TOMA, TOMOHARU NAGATA, HIRONOBU OYAMA
Assistant Cameramen: SATOSHI TAKAHASHI, NAOTO MURAISHI, IZUMI FUKUDA,
TAKAHIDE MASHIO
Grip: SEIJI WATARAI
Lighting Technicians: HIDENORI OKITA, KAZUO SUGA, TATSUYA SUZUKI, NORIYUKI
OHARA, KIYOSHI IZUMIDA
Sound Assistants: KEIGO SAKURAI, YASUSHI TANAKA, MASUMI ISHII
Sound Effects Technician: MASATOSHI SAITO
Re-recording: HIROSHI NAKAMURA
Studio Adviser: YOSHIHIRO NAKAYAMA
Assistant Editor: SHINICHI FUSHIMA
Negative Cutter: NOBORU NISHIHARA
Assistant Set Designers: HIDEMITSU YAMAZAKI, NARIYUKI KONDO, HIROKO HIDA
Set Builder: YOSHIYUKI ARAI
Assistant Set Decorators: YUKIO TOMIZAWA, KEIICHI HASEGAWA, MAKIKO KURIHARA,
KATSUMI YAMAURA
Assistant Wardrobe Stylists: FUMIO IWASAKI, KUMIKO MIYAKOSHI, KEIKO ISHIHARA
Make-up Artist: MIDORI KONUMA
Assistant Make-up Artist: YUMI YOKOSE
SFX Make-up Artist: ETSUKO EGAWA
Assistant SFX Make-up Artist: KAZUNORI HASHIMOTO
Hair Stylist: TADASHI NISHIMATSU
Food Coordinators: IZUMI ISHIMORI, SHOHEI MATSUMOTO
Geisha Manners Instructor: IKUKO AKASAKA
Kiyomoto and Shamisen Instructor: NOBU SENYASU
Stunt Coordinator: HIROFUMI NAKASE

Casting Assistance: N.C.P.
Actors Coordinator: YOSHIYUKI MAEJIMA
Still Photographer: TOSHIO FUJISAWA
Publicists: SUNDANCE COMPANY, MOTION PRODUCTIONS
Assistant Production Managers: SHINJI IWASHITA, TARO MORI
Liaison: JIRO YOSHIKAWA
Video and Graphic Displays: VIDEO IMAGE

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A-GE-MAN -- TALES OF A GOLDEN GEISHA

Synopsis

Written and directed by Juzo Itami, this film is an existential foray into the traditional relationship between the sexes, Japanese style, as seen through the eyes of a twentieth-century geisha.

In Japan, a woman who brings luck to men has traditionally been referred to as an *a-ge-man*. In Itami's fifth directorial effort, the star is, once again, his wife, Nobuko Miyamoto, who plays the part of Nayoko, an *a-ge-man*.

The film examines the basic weaknesses of Japanese men and how these weaknesses are reflected in Japanese society as a whole. Nayoko, who enters the "floating world" of the geisha in her early teens, acts as a kind of talisman to a procession of lovers, from a Buddhist priest and struggling banker to a "fixer" in the murky world of Japanese politics. The luck she brings to them all fades with the fading of their love for her, and their precipitous falls from symbiotic grace form the dramatic core of the story. Throughout, Nayoko remains morally pure, in stark contrast to the selfish love and ambitions of the men who seek her out for the luck her love brings. In the surprising denouement, her love proves a powerful restorative for the spirit, if not exactly for material fortune, making the film, in a sense, Itami's first "love story."

A-GE-MAN -- TALES OF A GOLDEN GEISHA

About the Director

Juzo Itami, the director of *A-Ge-Man -- Tales of a Golden Geisha*, is something of an oddity within Japanese film circles. Actor, essayist, designer, and interviewer, his talents also extend into the areas of variety shows, documentary programs, and television commercials. The son of one of Japan's pioneering film directors, Mansaku Itami, he is a consummate film fanatic.

All these seemingly diverse interests and talents suddenly found a powerful focus when, at the age of 50, he became a film director. "I think, because it was my father's profession, being a film director had seemed overly important to me," says Itami, commenting on why he directed his first film only at this relatively late age. Asked as to why he did not direct his first film earlier, he replies, "I think it was simply because for so long I was under the enormous shadow of my father's achievements as a film director."

"It had seemed like a mountain too high to climb. When I look back now, though, all the various things I've done were all part of a training process for me to become a film director. So, when the day arrived when I really wanted to express myself through the medium of motion pictures, I was ready. On my very first day as director, I found myself giving instructions to the crew and making endless decisions on the set just as if I had been a director for years.

"The thing that is so fascinating about being a director is that you have to call up and utilize *all* your talents and qualities. A director has to be a writer, craftsman, critic, member of the audience, head of a troupe of actors, impresario -- and, most importantly, an ordinary person living an ordinary life.

"Every time I complete a film, I feel as if I've burnt up everything in my conscious and subconscious mind so thoroughly that there isn't even a cinder left. The only thing that remains is a completed film. To me, directing films itself is a dramatic performance."

A-GE-MAN -- TALES OF A GOLDEN GEISHA

About the Cast

There is a critical paucity of "leading men" in today's Japanese cinema. Actors who are convincing as elderly, socially influential figures, or men of power are particularly rare. In addition, actresses who can play daughters of wealthy families are also difficult to find.

Because of the predominance of one-dimensional TV dramas, most actors and actresses in Japan are either young amateurs who cannot and do not "act," or are actors incapable of varying their acting styles. Actors who can develop the characters they play seem to be a dying breed. Since there is a large "fable" element in Itami films, actors who can embellish their characters are required. Casting, therefore, is always one of the most difficult tasks.

Nobuko Miyamoto, Juzo Itami's wife, plays the role of the heroine, **Nayoko**, a geisha. Miyamoto plays the character as a 16-year-old girl and as a grown woman of 36. She is probably the only actress in Japan today who has the ability to meet the demands of the role. She fits the character of the ideal Japanese woman, is realistic and humorous, and can affect the mannerisms and arts of the professional geisha.

Masahiko Tsugawa plays **Mondo**, Nayoko's sweetheart. The "Marcello Mastroianni of Japan" would be the best description of him. Tsugawa is able to effortlessly immerse himself in the personality of his character, "becoming" the character himself. Skillful and charming, he can play a good-looking, but ordinary office worker who is believable as a real person. Tsugawa is one of the best actors in Japan today. He has acted in all Itami's films so far.

Shogo Shimada, who plays **Zenbu Okura**, an elder statesman, is 84 and is a veteran of popular Japanese theater.

Hideji Otaki as bank president **Chijiwa** is a veteran stage actor and an acclaimed character actor. He has performed in most of Itami's films.

Akira Takarada as a scheming politician is a superstar and pioneering musical actor in Japan. He was the first Japanese actor to play Rhett Butler. *A-Ge-Man -- Tales of a Golden Geisha* is his 200th film and the first one in which he plays a bad guy.

Mitsuko, who plays Mondo's fiancée Eiko, makes her debut in *A-Ge-Man -- Tales of a Golden Geisha*. Having majored in mathematics at Washington University, she is a simultaneous interpreter for international conferences and a newscaster on television. After Itami spotted her, Mitsuko auditioned successfully for the role.

A-GE-MAN -- TALES OF A GOLDEN GEISHA

About the Photography

In Japanese film making, scenes are generally photographed as the complete image envisioned in the director's mind. In other words, films are not shot as they are typically done in America, where each scene is filmed from various angles and in various sizes, after which an enormous amount of footage is handed over for editing.

Itami's style, in this sense, is very Japanese and, at the same time, very spontaneous. The process involves Itami describing to the director of photography, Zenko Yamazaki, the action which he wants filmed, explaining what particular elements he would like the audience's attention to be drawn to. Yamazaki then positions his camera in a place that he thinks will best meet Itami's requirements. The actors are brought in, and while rehearsing, the frames and camera work are gradually worked out and perfected.

As the director and the director of photography begin to understand each other's requirements, more scenes are shot in single cuts. In the end, the film, 118 minutes long, was completed with less than 500 cuts, a relatively small number.

The film was shot with Arriflex BL equipment on Fuji film to the standard 1.37 frame format. With the recent decrease in the number of theaters capable of properly screening standard-format films, Itami may be forced to make his future films in the Vista format.

A-GE-MAN -- TALES OF A GOLDEN GEISHA

About the Music

Toshiyuki Honda, who wrote the music for *A Taxing Woman* and *A Taxing Woman's Return*, again composed the music for this film. Honda is one of the leading jazz sax players in Japan.

As soon as he was given the screenplay, Honda began thinking about the form that his music would take. Watching the daily rushes and loosely edited versions, he deepened his understanding of the film and expanded his ideas. Every time he had discussions with the director, he produced a short demo tape on which more discussions were based.

When the loosely edited but "complete" version was ready, final decisions were made. Honda and his musicians then performed and recorded a few different versions of the main theme, Mondo's theme, a love theme, and other songs, and handed them to Itami. Exactly how these pieces of music were to be used was left entirely up to Itami, who claims that only he knows best "how the completed music should be used."

The only piece of music in this film composed and performed as "movie music" per se, i.e., strictly to the scenes on the screen, was "Mondo's Dream."

A-GE-MAN -- TALES OF A GOLDEN GEISHA

About the Theme

The film depicts Japan as a culture in which men are weak. Japanese men are unable to assert themselves, confront others, make decisions on their own, take responsibility for their actions, or cope with solitude. This originates from the fact that the Japanese place the greatest importance upon harmony in human relations and lack an established sense of ethics in this area. This applies both to men in power as well as to ordinary men. In the recent "Recruit Scandal," when a large corporation was discovered to have been offering favorable stock options to key politicians and others in a position to help their business, all those named for allegedly accepting these bribes tried to blame their subordinates, relatives, or even wives for getting them involved in the obviously illegal stock transactions. This situation was a grotesque manifestation of basic shortcomings in Japanese men.

In *A-Ge-Man -- Tales of a Golden Geisha*, Juzo Itami depicts the way Japanese men are seen through the eyes of a woman. Japanese men, like lost infants, cry for their "mothers." And the Japanese women are forced to play mother to support and encourage the men. That is the reality of the man-woman relationship in Japan which Itami wanted to portray in *A-Ge-Man -- Tales of a Golden Geisha*.

A-GE-MAN -- TALES OF A GOLDEN GEISHA

About Geisha

Gei of geisha means "arts" -- the arts of singing, dancing, and playing music. Geisha are called to party rooms in Japanese-style restaurants (*ryotei*), where they pour sake for guests, help create pleasant conversation, and entertain with their *gei*.

Some geisha are independent, while others belong to geisha houses. They are paid on an hourly basis.

Inviting four or five guests to a first-class *ryotei* and spending three hours with a few first-class geisha will cost around ¥500,000.

The types of geisha vary widely, from top-class ones who accept only VIPs as customers, to those at spa resorts and others at the lowest rung who are little more than prostitutes.

As has already been portrayed in many films, in the old days, many geisha were daughters of poor farmers who were sold to geisha houses as trainees for monetary advances.

In general, geisha are unmarried; a majority are mistresses of influential men and are "kept" in houses given to them by their patrons.

Because becoming a good geisha requires years of rigorous training, very few women opt for this profession today. In all likelihood, the profession will die out in the not-too-distant future.

A-GE-MAN -- TALES OF A GOLDEN GEISHA

About Kimono

This film about geisha is one in which costumes play an important role. Many female Japanese movie-goers watch films about geisha just to admire the kimono they wear.

The kimono that the heroine Nayoko wears are all collector's items. And in the course of the film, a whole series of beautiful kimono that extremely wealthy men lavished on their geisha mistresses a few decades ago are seen.

A-GE-MAN -- TALES OF A GOLDEN GEISHA

About Ryotei, Japanese-style Restaurant

Many *ryotei* scenes appear in this film. *Ryotei* are not like restaurants in the Western sense. Rather, they are establishments that offer private rooms to customers. Important political and financial figures and celebrities entertain or have private meetings and discussions with important guests in these rooms, where they can wine and dine in a traditional Japanese manner, or be entertained by a geisha.

It was impossible to shoot the film in an actual first-class *ryotei*. Even building a *ryotei* set would have been extremely expensive.

This posed a particularly difficult problem and was threatening to delay production when the producers had a stroke of luck: a *ryotei* that Itami frequented was scheduled to be demolished. The *ryotei* was a first-class establishment with a long history, located in Akasaka, the heart of Tokyo. The proprietor had been forced to close down because high-rise buildings constructed in recent years had weakened the foundation and pillars of the *ryotei*, causing them to become unstable.

The proprietor allowed shooting in his *ryotei* for one month prior to the demolition date. Thanks to this fortunate coincidence, the *ryotei* scenes in the film have a genuine air of authentic *ryotei* style, and this enhances the overall quality of the film.

A-GE-MAN -- TALES OF A GOLDEN GEISHA

About the Story Structure

A traditional genre in Japanese films is the depiction of an adult romance with a geisha, often the heroine of the film. The man is, typically, childish and self-centered, while the woman is absolutely selfless, persevering, and dedicated. *A-Ge-Man -- Tales of a Golden Geisha* is a modernized version of this traditional genre.

Though firmly rooted in traditional Japanese culture, Juzo Itami treated this geisha theme within the structure of a conventionally American three-act story. This method is expected to make the film more accessible to foreign audiences, but, more importantly, it also symbolizes the Japan of today -- a society in which traditional attitudes are being questioned within the Western framework of rules and values.

One of the most notable aspects of Itami's style is the way in which it allows one to view his own culture from the perspective of another culture, and, in the process, combining two otherwise intrinsically unlinkable elements.

It took Itami six months to complete the screenplay of this film. Unlike his earlier films, *A Taxing Woman* and its sequel, *A Taxing Woman's Return*, no massive field research was necessary prior to writing the story. However, after the first draft was completed, exhaustive research was conducted to ensure authenticity. The political, financial, and "floating" worlds depicted in the film directly reflect reality, although they are simplified somewhat so as not to detract from the main story line.