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The Quiet Master

By Peter Bradshaw

[Debates over the best film of all time tend to go no further than Hollywood classics such as Citizen Kane. But the influential Halliwell's Film Guide now says the title belongs to Tokyo Story, a little-known Japanese film in which nothing much happens. Peter Bradshaw pays tribute.]

There is a pleasing hare-and-the-tortoise quality to the triumph of Tokyo Story by Ozu Yasujiro in the 1,000 Best Films list brought to us by Halliwell's Film Guide. Can it really be true that this deceptively gentle black and white film from 1953 about the poignancy of growing old is No 1, beating Citizen Kane and his sled? Humphrey and Ingrid by the piano? Scarlett and Rhett in the flames of Atlanta? Or even that Ozu has trounced the far more commercial Japanese film-maker Kurosawa Akira?

It can. The reputation of Ozu only grows with the years. Every time his movies are shown on television or at film festivals, more people find themselves enraptured by his delicate watercolour emotions, his mastery of simplicity and reticence, in which you glimpse explicit pain and joy. It is perhaps even more remarkable now that, in the west, Japanese culture is fashionable for Manga, for martial arts, for extreme cinema, for the playful pop culture of the novelist Murakami Haruki - anything but the gentle quietism and transcendental simplicity of Ozu (1903-1963), the veteran of silent films who graduated to making classic dramas of Japanese family life.

His status as a real arthouse master continues to mount. In 2000, critic Derek Malcolm named Tokyo Story as the best in his Century of Films, and it continues to hold its own in the Sight and Sound poll of best films, which is voted on by pundits and directors every 10 years. The magazine called it "one of the three greatest films of all time".

It is certainly his masterpiece: tender, profoundly mysterious and desperately sad. But its exquisite melancholy is not derived from something esoteric or exotic, but a very real human anxiety, instantly comprehensible. How do we look after our elderly parents as they confront imminent death? How far can we afford to expose ourselves to their secret pain and fear? And when it is our turn to grow old, can we expect our children to share the burden?

Tomi and Sukichi, played by Ozu regulars Higashiyama Chiyeko and Ryu Chishu, are an elderly couple who make the arduous journey to Tokyo to visit their heartless grown-up children, only to discover that they are just too busy with their professional lives and young families to find any time for them. The only person who does care is their daughter-in-law Toriko, widowed after their son - her husband - was declared missing presumed dead in the second world war. Toriko has work pressures as well, but she repeatedly asks her boss for time away from the office to spend time with this poor old couple who are the last link to her vanished husband. Toriko is played by the incomparable Hara Setsuko, a key Ozu player, whose desperately polite and urgently generous smile suppresses a quiver of heartbreak. Like them, she is lonely and secretly afraid of the future. Her beauty, and sheer decency, continues to inspire a passionately protective emotion in Ozu fans whenever they see this film - or any of the films she made with him.

Tomi takes her tiny grandson for a walk and asks him if he wants to be a doctor when he grows up, like his father. "I wonder if I'll still be here when you are," she adds with a flash of anxiety, shocking us with the revelation that, so far from being a wise grandmother calmly accepting her own mortality, she is as frightened and unprepared as anyone. When mortality does intervene, it is for Toriko to tell us that children gradually drift away from their parents. "Isn't life disappointing?" replies her sister quietly, one of the most devastating lines in cinema. Ozu leaves us with the enigmatic response of Sukichi to his wife's death: no tears, just a presentation of his unvaryingly polite and humble smile to the world. He is utterly alone - but was he utterly alone when his wife was still alive?

Ozu's mannerisms of directing are very eccentric if you are not used to them. He uses low shooting positions, as if the camera itself is bowing, group compositions in profile and restful tableaux of outdoor landscapes (often showing railway lines or stations) or empty interiors to cleanse the viewer's palate between scenes. He does not fade or dissolve between scenes, but crisply cuts. Oddly, his characters will often speak straight into the camera for dialogue exchanges - something that would get today's film-school students hit across the knuckles with a ruler. It is a style so formally distinctive and stylised as virtually to constitute a kabuki-cinema language of Ozu's own invention. Nobody else in Japanese cinema worked like this. But soon one becomes used to it - and then completely hooked.

After Tokyo Story, Ozu made another eight films, all of them superbly accomplished, though arguably not achieving the sublime quality of this movie. Hara was a legend in her home country for never marrying and having children - all but unthinkable in Japanese society - and became known as the "eternal virgin", having effectively devoted herself to the great director. Ten years after the film was made, she sensationally retired from the movies at the height of her fame and now, at 85 years old, holds a Salinger-like fascination for certain sections of the media as she has always refused to be interviewed or photographed. But she should really be as legendary here as Garbo or Ingrid Bergman or Louise Brooks. It would be nice if Tokyo Story's triumph triggered a wave of postcards and posters of the young Setsuko Hara in every student's room.

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