

Japan Foundation Supported Project
Mikio Naruse Season at the BFI Southbank

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Venue: BFI Southbank, London

In Japan Naruse Mikio (1905-69) is considered to be a master of the cinema and revered as much as Mizoguchi and Ozu, yet his films are largely unknown here in the UK. The season of Naruse's greatest films that showed at the British Film Institute from 29 June – 31 July 2007 was therefore an exciting and invaluable experience.

Naruse's films display a unique, pure dramatic and visual sensibility and are often poignant tales of working-class life concentrating, notably, on female characters who are both trapped by, and struggling against, social and familial mores. Naruse portrays women in a realistic way and seems to understand them and their role in modern society.

Naruse's films are similar to those of Ozu, in particular the world of *Tokyo Story* but his trajectory and scope go beyond that of even Ozu's, for they go to the still centre of the turning world in depicting with empathy the lives of ordinary women in 50s' Tokyo. His Tokyo is both emblematic of the miracle of post-war reconstruction and a reminder of the sad, tragic and non-distant past.

In this retrospective of Naruse's films, many are depictions of this Tokyo. In particular the film *Ginza Cosmetics* (1951), in which Tanaka Kinuyo is sensational as a fading bar hostess in the Ginza District of Tokyo, nearing middle-age and unable to spend time with her son. It is a key post-war Japanese film and is essential viewing.

But Naruse's most memorable film about Tokyo is *Floating Clouds* (1955), which opens in the bombed and charred ruins of Tokyo where Yukiko (played by Takamine Hideko) is in search of Tomioka, her war-time colleague. They resume their love-affair, but when Tomioka tells Yukiko that he cannot leave his wife they both seem adrift. Despite this, the film has a still centre – as beautiful as a vase or the human heart – that makes it Naruse's masterpiece.

Another classic is *When a Woman ascends the Stairs* (1960), probably the only one of his films widely known in the West. It stars Takamine Hideko, again, as an ageing hostess, a widow trying to uphold her dignity in the sleazy bars of Ginza. This film is not as perfect as *Floating Clouds*, but shares similar themes and is universal in its meaning and theme of living a life not chosen.

The pre-war films showing and the post-1960 films in general are less successful and are not as convincing as Naruse's decade from 1950 to 1960, but both *Her Lonely Lane* (1962) - based on the life of the writer Hayashi Fumiko whose books Naruse often adapted for the screen - and *Yearning* (1964), are late works of elegiac beauty.

Naruse Mikio's films are significant, beautiful and sad and very relevant even today. The films from this season build an awareness for the audience of how Japan - and, in particular, Tokyo - was devastated by the Asia-Pacific War and its aftermath and help lead to a deeper understanding of Japanese Society and psychology since then. The Tokyo of the post-war years, depicted with such understated sadness and beauty, could well be the London of 1945. And perhaps all the more so today, in 2007, Naruse's Tokyo casts a long shadow - and benevolent rays of light - over both Tokyo and London, showing us the universal, shared experience of living in the city, both East and West.

"From the youngest age, I have thought that the world we live in betrays us; this thought still remains with me". These are the words of Naruse Mikio. His films speak quietly to us, but the beat of the heart in all his films can somehow be heard. Perhaps Naruse's greatest gift to us is his exploration of the inner life. His films, as this season so well exemplifies, do endure and remain - as works of art, subtle, sad and beautiful. They are deep, clear, running streams from a still and lasting source.

- Stephen Wilson - July 2007