



BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL

TOKYO STORY (U)

Director: Yasujirō Ozu

Starring: Chishu Ryu, Chieko Higashiyama, Toru Abu, Setsuko Hara

Japan, 1953, 2 hours 16 minutes, Japanese + English subtitles

"As you watch, it seems nothing is happening. When it's over you realise you've seen an encyclopedia of the human condition." **Charles Ramirez Berg, *Sight and Sound*.**

In the 2023 Sight and Sound Greatest Films of All Time critics poll *Tokyo Story* by Yasujiro Ozu was placed fourth, sealing its position as one of world cinema's enduring masterpieces. Yet until the 1960s Ozu's films were rarely shown outside of his homeland, being considered too Japanese for international audiences. Only with the support of directors like Wim Wenders and Paul Schrader, did Ozu's distinctive cinema get a wider release in the West.

Yasujiro Ozu (1903 – 1963) made over 50 films in career which dated from the silent era through to colour films in the 1960s. His early films are surprisingly varied including raucous comedies and gangster melodramas, but from the late 1930s onwards Ozu concentrated exclusively on domestic dramas, focusing on the relationships between older and younger generations.

Tokyo Story is Ozu's most famous film, the story of an elderly couple from the countryside who travel to post-war Tokyo to visit two of their grown-up children. The offspring, one a doctor the other a beautician, find the visit an inconvenience and pass the parents around, at one point even sending them to a resort hotel to get them out of the way. The only person who is pleased to see them is their daughter-in-law Noriko (Setsuko Hara) the widow of another son who died in the war.

The film starts as a wry comedy with the old couple bemused by the big city and their children's desperate attempts to keep them occupied. But in the final act the mood becomes more sombre and the concluding scenes between Noriko and the couple's youngest daughter Kyoko are thought by some to be among the most moving in cinema history. *Tokyo Story's* greatness comes from its profound meditation on family, on ageing and the passage of time.

Ozu was an utterly distinctive director, creating his own unique style which ignored many accepted cinematic conventions. Ozu's camera rarely moves and is always at a low angle, about 18 inches from the floor, the so-called tatami position named after the mats on which Japanese people kneel. Actors talk almost straight at the camera not in the classic Hollywood style of reverse angles. Scenes are separated by landscape shots of seemingly banal scenes of factory chimneys or washing lines. These images, beautiful in their own right, are treasured by Ozu aficionados.

When some people say, "Why don't you make something different once in a while?" I say, I'm a tofu-ya (tofu maker). There's no way that the result will be anything delicious if you ask a "tofu-ya" to make "curry" or "tonkatsu."

Yasujiro Ozu

Notes compiled by Steve Freer