

## A Noh Drama and Ozu's *Late Spring*

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### Introduction

*Late Spring* (*Banshun*) is a 1949 black and white film directed by Yasujiro Ozu (1903-1963). The film was shot between May and September 1949, during the Allied Power's Occupation of Japan. Many people consider this film Ozu's finest achievement. *Late Spring* was awarded the prestigious Kinema Junpo Critics Award as the best Japanese production released in 1949. The film is based on a 1939 short story entitled *Father and Daughter* by Kazuo Hirotsu (1891 – 1968), a novelist and literary critic.<sup>i</sup> *Late Spring*'s climactic scene is set in a Noh Theater where the father and daughter watch an ancient drama. This is where Japan's old theatrical tradition elegantly converges into its new medium of film.

Ozu's *Late Spring* centers around Noriko (played by legendary Hara Setsuko), a 27-year-old woman, who lives happily with her widowed father, Professor Somiya, in historical North Kamakura. Noriko is in no hurry to get married but her father wants to see her settled. Noriko's aunt tells her that her father is thinking about remarrying a widow named Mrs. Miwa. Although this is not true, Noriko's father goes along with the scheme. The news of her father's possible remarriage greatly disturbs Noriko, but she eventually agrees to marry a man whom her aunt has arranged Noriko to meet. Ozu's central recurring theme which focuses a family pressuring a grown child to marry and the sadness and devastation this leaves in its wake. Donald Richie in his *Ozu* states:

The dissolution of the family is a catastrophe because in Japan --- as contrasted with the United States, where leaving the family is considered proof of maturity -- one's sense of self depends to an important extent upon those who one lives, studies, works. An identification with family (or with clan, nation, school, or company) is necessary for a complete identification of self. (Richie 4)

Ozu shot the film while Japan's postwar society was going through a major transformation. Japan's government introduced the new constitution only two years before the production of this film. The constitution banned the traditional family system while the modern value of individualism was being introduced; the film directly addresses this changing family dynamic. Interestingly, however, what plays a pivotal role in the film is not the newly introduced Constitution of Japan, but an ancient drama, the Noh. The voice of ancient wisdom of the Noh echoes throughout Ozu's *Late Spring*.

### Noh Drama "Water Iris"

Noh Drama is the oldest surviving form of Japanese theater and had been performed for samurai warriors during the medieval period.<sup>ii</sup> Noh Drama

combines music, dance, and acting to communicate Buddhist themes. On the Noh stage the gestures are minimal while the movement is restrained and in slow motion. Noh is also a symbolic art that uses very little scenery. Acting in Noh is often referred to as ‘the art of walking,’ since so much emphasis is placed on the stylistic way in which a character enters, moves around the stage, and exits.

There are about 250 Noh plays. The five classifications of Noh plays are *shin* (god), *nan* (man), *nyo* (woman), *kyo* (madness), and *ki* (demon). The film’s *Kakitsubata* that the father and daughter watch belongs to the *nyo* category in which the principal character is a female, in this case the spirit of water iris. Noh Drama is performed on a special stage and the principal character called the *shite* wears a mask while other characters, including the secondary character called the *waki*, do not. Often the plot of a Noh play recreates famous scenes from well-known works of Classical Japanese literature. The playwright Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443) is most associated with the development of the formal structure of Noh. Today, there are the five extant schools of Noh acting: the Kanze, Hōshō, Konparu, Kongō, and Kita.<sup>iii</sup> Ozu’s film features the Kanze troupe. Prior to the film’s production, Ozu consulted Konparu Soemon XXII, a famous Noh drummer, and Soemon recommended *Kakitsubata*. In the film, Umewaka Manzaburo II played the *shite*. Manzaburo was head master of the Kanze Umewaka Noh School. The troupe on the film’s stage consisted of the *waki* (the secondary character), four musicians, and eleven singers from the Kanze School. The film’s Noh scene thus represents the best of the Kanze Umewaka Noh School.

Following the prescribed pattern of Noh plays, *Kakitsubata* begins with a monk (the *waki*) traveling in the province of Mikawa (present-day Aichi prefecture). There, a woman (the *shite*) appears and tells him that this place, called Yatsunashi, is famous for water iris flowers (*kakitsubata*). The woman recounts the old story of Ariwara no Narihira (825-880), the central character of *Ise monogatari*, who composed the poem in Yatsunashi a long time ago. Later the same woman changes her apparel. In Noh plays the principal character often first appears ordinary and then later reveals her true identity. The woman is now clad in a beautiful Chinese-style *kimono* robe, and a diaphanous headdress, known as *sukibitai*. She explains that the *kimono* robe belonged to Princess Takako, who was mentioned in Narihira’s poem, and the headdress was once owned by Narihira. She then reveals that she is the spirit of the water iris. Princess Takako (842-910) was the daughter of Fujiwar no Nagara and also known as Fujiwara no Takako. Takako was Emperor Seiwa’s consort and mother of Emperor Yōzei. Her romance with Narihira, which ended with her marriage to the emperor, was widely known. The spirit of iris represents the long-lost story of romance of Narihira and Takako on stage. She dances in her beautiful attire. This dance, the visionary dance, is the highlight of the Noh play.

Noriko learned from her aunt about the possible remarriage of her father and met a man whom her aunt arranged a marriage meeting with. However, she has no intention to leave her father and comfortable home. There is a seven-minute Noh theater scene in the midpoint of *Late Spring*. Then all of sudden her world turns upside down during the Noh scene. In the film’s climactic scene, Noriko and her father watch the Noh drama called “Water Iris (*Kakitsubata*),” performed by the Kanze Noh troupe. The *shite*, the primary player, is the spirit of the water iris,

who dances in her elegant attire while reciting an ancient story of lost love and poetry from the *Tale of Ise*, a ninth century literary work. The spirit eventually receives the merit of Buddha's law and achieves enlightenment before disappearing at dawn. This is a typical plot because Noh drama represents Buddhist themes. While watching the spirit dance, Noriko sees her father exchange greetings with Mrs. Miwa, who is also in the theater. Noriko's mood at once darkens because of jealousy and fear of her uncertain future. The film's climactic scene and the Noh drama's high point converge. The film interacts with the Noh drama and illuminates Noriko's emotional roller-coaster journey. This is an intense psychological scene resonating to the somber ancient chants of Noh, which is heard throughout this particular scene. At the same time the spirit's message about transient life remains true even after the scene of the Noh performance in the film.

### The Visionary Dance

Let us further examine the highlight of this Noh play, namely the visionary dance and the chanting of the *shite*, a spirit of water iris. On stage the spirit seems to plunge into a profound trance. While dancing she connects Narihira's brilliant love poem with the merit of Buddha. As mentioned earlier, the Noh is based on the *Tale of Ise*, a Japanese collection of *waka* poems and associated narrative, dating from the ninth century.<sup>iv</sup> It is believed that the central character of the tale is Ariwara no Narihira (825-880), a celebrated courtier-poet. The tale's eighth episode tells that Narihira travels to Yatsushashi and composes a poem while admiring the water iris:

|                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <i><b>K</b>ara-goromo</i>           | The Chinese-style robe...                          |
| <i><b>K</b>i-tsutsu nare-ni-shi</i> | Familiar as the skirt of a well-worn robe of hers. |
| <i><b>T</b>suma shi areba</i>       | I have a beloved wife back home.                   |
| <i><b>H</b>aru-haru ki-nuru</i>     | This journey to a distant land                     |
| <i><b>T</b>abi wo shi zo omou.</i>  | Fills my heart with grief.                         |

When the first syllable of each stanza is put together, it forms the word, "*ka ki tsu ha ta*" (water iris). The poem showcases Narihira's superb talent and spontaneous wit as a poet. In the climactic scene of Ozu's film the *shite* retells Narihira's eighth episode and the poem. Then the spirit and the reciters transcend the ancient love story in order to fit the Noh's central theme of enlightenment. This transcendence occurs over a relatively short period of time through the exchange of the spirit and the reciters. During this exchange the spirit tends to dwell on the past story while the reciters lead her to a deeper understanding of the past event and human life in general:

**Iris:** The water iris planted at my old house...

**Reciters:** Today, only the color of the flower reminds me of the old days. Only the color is left for...

**Iris:** the vestige of "that ancient man," The scent of citrus flowers invites the memory of him from the past. The wig made of sword-like leaves of calamus has the scent of citrus flowers.

**Reciters:** Which is the color. What is alike is the deep purple of the water iris and the sword leaved iris... Singing at the top of the tree is...

**Iris:** the cicada. The sleeves of *karakoromo*.

**Reciters:** are as white as the deutzia or snow. The darkness of the night begins to break. In the morning sky the rays of light illuminate the eastern clouds in faint purple. The purple flower, the spirits of the water iris is enlightened. Acquiring the holy teaching of Buddha that flowers, trees, soils, and all the creatures can attain Buddhahood, she fades away.<sup>v</sup>

Watching this spirit dance, Noriko witnesses her father exchange greetings with Mrs. Miwa and Noriko also greets her. Noriko smiles at Mrs. Miwa who greets her in return. Noriko then stealthily glances back at her a few more times and her facial expressions go through a total transformation until she, tormented, bends down her head. She is no longer a woman who is content with her life and sure of her future. She has realized that she will not be needed at home because Mrs. Miwa will take over her role of looking after her father. The life that she has known and believed would last forever is no more and she will have no choice but to marry Mr. Satake, whom her aunt arranged her to meet. She is now a troubled soul, no longer the happy young woman that she was up until just a few minutes ago. Noriko descends into the darkness while the spirit dances into Buddhahood on stage. The world that Noriko believed to last forever can instantly be shattered. The film's climactic scene and the Noh drama's high point thus crisscross.

The influence of the Noh Drama is found in other films directed by well-known directors who were Ozu's contemporaries. The wife, one of the four main characters in Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), wears makeup which makes her face resemble the Noh mask. In Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* (1953) Lady Wakasa wears a similar makeup and her late father's ghostly voice chants to Noh-style music while she dances. However, unlike Ozu's *Late Spring* these films use the ancient drama for visual and artistic effects, not to affect the film's story line or the central theme. Ozu uses Noh to demonstrate the film's theme.

### **Getting Married Is Not Happiness**

In one of the last segments of Ozu's film Noriko and her father make a trip to Kyoto.<sup>vi</sup> Noriko's wedding day is already set, and as soon as they return from the trip Noriko and her aunt will be busy preparing for the wedding. On their final day in Kyoto, Noriko stops packing her suitcase and says to her father that she is happy as she is and she does not mind if he remarries. She asks her father if she can remain home unmarried. Noriko says she does not think if she marries she will be any happier than she is now. Here she verbalizes her true feelings that she hid in that Noh theater. Her father replies that it is not true and that getting married does not lead to happiness but creating a happy life together will. It may take years or even longer but with consistent effort a couple can make their marriage work and find happiness in it. Happiness, he continues, cannot be given but it has to be created. Noriko's father adds that his own marriage went through some troubles at the start and saw Noriko's late mother weeping in the corner of the kitchen many times, but she trusted him and stayed in the marriage. The father explains that this has been a cycle throughout the history of human life. He

reminds her that he is nearing the end of his life but she and her husband are just beginning theirs. Noriko apologizes to her father, saying that she was self-centered and she truly understands what he has just said. She bends down her head as if she is disappointed but then emerges with a smile on her face. She cheerfully resumes packing her suitcase. This scene marks the final stage of Noriko's transcendental experience from a daughter to a wife-to-be. She makes a final break with her past and she is now ready for another chapter of her life. Noriko's father is delighted to see her smile again. He says to her that he did not want her get married unwillingly and have doubts about her marriage and future.

Modern readers will interpret the father's advice as outdated and inadequate in addressing the real issues involved in marriage and probably feel that Noriko does not have to apologize at all. Nevertheless, it is also clear to the viewers that the father's words come from his heart and love for his daughter. His view of marriage is certainly old-fashioned yet there is a hint of universal truth in his advice. The father's words echo the wisdom of the past and the central theme of the Noh drama *Kakitsubata*---enlightenment. Like the spirit of water iris, Noriko discards the past and moves on to the next stage of her life. In the film's final scene the father, who returns from Noriko's wedding, sits down in a chair and starts peeling an apple. He then stops and droops his head down in sadness. He is alone in an empty house. He knows that this is the cycle of a long history of human life as he told his daughter.

Ozu's film utilizes the Noh drama to illuminate Noriko's emotional turmoil. At the same time, the spirit's message about transient life remains true: "The sleeves of *karakoromo* are as white as the deutzia or snow./ The darkness of the night begins to break." During the film's finale Noriko appears clad in her white bridal kimono, ready to begin a new chapter of her life. The multiple layers of narratives from the past and the present are added and help to provide the richness and the depth to the film's climactic scene while the ancient love story of Narihira transcends itself into enlightenment while the spirit of iris dances. Noriko's life transforms just as Narihira's story on the Noh stage does.

### **Yasujirō Ozu**

Ozu's films were not widely seen in the West until the 1970s. Prior to this, in Japan his movies were regarded as 'too Japanese' to be appreciated by foreign audiences because he was a champion of tradition values, particularly the quintessential Japanese institution, the family, especially of middle-class. If Akira Kurosawa, an internationally known director, is the artistic spokesman for modern values and the anguished individual, then Ozu speaks for the conservative majority, especially parents. He never married and lived with his mother.

Ozu was born in Tokyo in 1903. At age ten he was sent by his father, a fertilizer merchant, to a remote school in the family's ancestral hometown, Matsusaka in Mie Prefecture. He was raised by his devoted, pampering mother and until he was twenty rarely saw his father. He was a free-spirited youth, with little patience for formal schooling, but he had a passion for Hollywood movies. After watching the film *Civilization*, he knew he was destined to be a moviemaker. After finishing middle school, he worked for a year as an assistant teacher at a village school.<sup>vii</sup> Back in Tokyo 20-year-old Ozu landed a dream-come-true job as an

assistant cameraman at the Shochiku Film Company through an uncle's connections. He was rapidly promoted and by the end of 1926 became an assistant director. One year later in 1927, he made his first film, *Zange no Yaeba* (Sword of Penitence), a costume piece. The *Kinema Junpo* magazine ranked his 1932 work *Umarete wa mita keredo* (I Was Born, but . . .) at the top of its best ten movies listing. During World War II, he was commanded to make documentaries and went with the Japanese forces to the South Pacific war zones. In 1945 he was interned for six months in a British POW camp. After the war he renewed his creative talent as a filmmaker. *Late Spring* was produced during these postwar years.

Ozu is well-known for his distinctive styles of film making. He never followed conventional Hollywood style movie making. Among all directors both from East and West he is probably visually most spare, which is a reminder of Noh. Among all of Ozu's unique styles of directing, he is mainly known for his low camera position, about three feet above the ground. In his *Transcendental Style in Film*, Paul Schrader states:

Ozu's camera is always at the level of a person seated in traditional fashion on the *tatami*, about three feet above the ground. "The traditional view is the view in repose, commanding a very limited field of vision. It is the attitude of watching, for listening, it is the position from which one see the Noh, from which one partakes of the tea ceremony. It is the aesthetic attitude, it is the passive attitude. (Schrader 22)

Ozu's camera position corresponds to the position from which Noriko and her father watch the Noh. Ozu also interposes a shot or multiple shots of an object, a group of objects, a room, or a landscape, often devoid of human figures. These units of film have been variously called 'curtain shots,' 'intermediate spaces,' 'empty shots' or, most frequently, 'pillow shots.' The nature and function of these shots are disputed by film critics, but surely those shots are aesthetically connected to his film's theme. In *Late Spring* a shot of a single leafy tree appears immediately after the Noh play scene while the Noh music of chant is still being played: "Acquiring the holy teaching of Buddha that flowers, trees, soils, and all the creatures can attain Buddhahood." Here the shot of a single tree corresponds to what the reciters are chanting in *Kakitsubata*. Also, the tree is clearly a reminder of the painting of the sacred pine tree at the back of traditional Noh Theater, where a spirit is believed to descend.

Ozu's screenplays, usually written in collaboration with his longtime writing partner, Kogo Noda, are lean and unadorned. To Ozu, what is left unsaid is just as important as what is said. He believed that, like minimalistic Noh, in the art of acting less is more. He usually chose the actors in his casts according to their personality rather than sheer acting ability. Ozu often instructed his actors not to move and to express their feelings only with their eyes. In the film's climax no words are exchanged among Noriko, her father and Mrs. Miwa. Only Noriko's facial expression reveals the true depth of her inner turmoil. Following Ozu's direction Noriko indeed reveals her emotion through her eyes while frequently glancing over at Mrs. Miwa.

Behind Ozu's script writing, editing of the film and directions of his actors lies his film philosophy. Devoid of any eye-catching visual effects or action, his film leads a viewer to the subtle beauty and joy found in the very fabric of a man's daily life. In his *A Short History of Movies*, Gerald Mast sums up Ozu's style:

An inevitable Ozu effect is that just at that point when one wonders if anything is going to happen and if the film is going to anywhere (some forty-five minutes into it), the film's structure, idea, warmth, subtlety, and charm grab hold of the viewer and refuse to let go until the end. (Mast 422)

### **Setsuko Hara and Chishu Ryu**

The role of Noriko is played by Setsuko Hara, a legendary actress of great beauty. Hara is shrouded in a mystic aura and is the perfect actress to play the role of Noriko in Ozu's film. Hara was born as Masae Aida on June 17, 1920 in Yokohama, Japan. She made her film debut in 1935 *Tamerau Nakare Wakodo yo* (Do not Hesitate, Young Folks) directed by Tetsu Taguchi. Earlier in her career she appeared in Japanese-German films directed by Arnold Frank. She later appeared on several films of Yasujiro Ozu, including the so-called Noriko series. Hara appeared in more than one hundred movies and her last film was 1962 *Chushingura* directed by Hiroshi Inagaki. Hara is called Eternal Virgin in Japan, perhaps because she mysteriously quit her job as an actress in 1962 and there is little information on her personal life and a total absence of any kind of gossip connecting her. Some people speculate that she quit her job because after years of working since she was young Hara no longer had to support her large family financially. The rumor has never been validated but it may hint at her being a holder of traditional family values. This elegant yet enigmatic Hara can be compared to the masked principal character of Noh. In Japan, it was said that her tall statuesque and dignified demeanor suggested a Western style woman but it is quite opposite from her usual being. Hara is a traditional woman under her modern appearance. She is thus a perfect fit to the role of Noriko, a traditional girl who lives in a society in transformation. This is an example of Ozu's selection of criteria of choosing his players according to their personality. In his movie making Ozu aims at creating a certain quality which is pure and genuine. In his film Hara is Noriko.<sup>viii</sup>

The father is played by Chishu Ryu (1904-1993), one of Ozu's favorite players. Ryu was a son of the priest of Raishoji Temple in a village of Kumamoto. His childhood and adolescence spent there certainly had a great influence on his character. Ryu is best known in Japan for playing the part of a downtown Tokyo temple priest called Gozen-sama in the popular *Tora-san* film series. In 1924, he went to Tokyo to study Indian philosophy at Toyo University. One year later the Shochiku Movie Company held its first audition for young talent, and to his astonishment Ryu was accepted. Ozu saw promise in Ryu and started casting him in his films. Like Hara, Ryu had no scandal attached to his name and he neither drank nor gambled. In 1949 he received the Mainichi Film Award for best actor and there were many awards to follow (Kirkup). Ozu chose the right people for his film.

The film ends with a scene of a beach where ocean waves are crashing upon ashore. Ozu used to say that he tried to portray the cycle of life, which the cyclical waves in the scene symbolize. The cyclical waves echo the father's notion of 'a cycle throughout the history of human life' in the film. Ozu moved to near the Jochiji temple in North Kamakura in 1952 and lived there until his death. He died on the evening of December 12, 1963, on his 60th birthday. His ashes were buried at the Engaku Temple in North Kamakura. Ozu's tombstone bears the single character for *mu* 無 - an aesthetic word, also a philosophical term, one which is usually translated as "emptiness" but which suggests the emptiness that, in Zen philosophy, is everything. It is said that his film staff and actors came to visit his grave. One of them was Chishu Ryu, the father in *Late Spring*, who bowed his head and prayed with his folded hands. The message of the spirit of the iris about transient life (*mu*) in Noh plays remains true even after *Late Spring*.

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<sup>i</sup> *Father and Daughter* is a relatively obscure work, not included in Hirotsu Kazuo's complete works. In Hirotsu's short story, the father first pretends that he is going to remarry a widow and later ends up actually doing so.

<sup>ii</sup> The other two surviving theaters are Bunraku and Kabuki. For general information on the influence of classical theater on film, see Keiko McDonald's *Japanese Classical Theater in Film*, Introduction.

<sup>iii</sup> Zeami believed that beauty of Noh lies in suggestion, simplicity, subtlety and restraint.

<sup>iv</sup> *Waka* (Japanese poem) is a type of poetry in classical Japanese literature. The short form of *waka* called *Tanka* consist of five lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic units.

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.the-noh.com/en/plays/data/program\\_029.html](http://www.the-noh.com/en/plays/data/program_029.html)

<sup>vi</sup> Originally the father and daughter makes a trip to visit her mother's grave but the script had to be rewritten to pass the censorship.

<sup>vii</sup> Ozu was expelled from school after school found out that he had written a love letter to another student.

<sup>viii</sup> Hara lived in North Kamakura and retired two years after Ozu's death.

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