CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR DRAMATIC FILMS

By KIZO NAGASHIMA

JAPAN during 1939 produced 550 dramatic films which were shown to an aggregate audience of 400,000,000 paid admissions. In Japan as elsewhere the dramatic film offers a modern and fresh appeal to the public at large.

In Japan there is the nob drama, with a background of six hundred years; the kabuki drama, with a history of some three hundred years; the so-called "new school" theatre, which started about fifty years ago, and the "new" drama, which sprang up about thirty years ago. Each has its own field, in which it is still in vogue. Then what is the characteristic difference between theatre-goers and movie-goers?

The nob play originated among the samurai (warrior) classes of the feudal days, and even today it is appreciated and supported mainly by the upper aristocracy which is descended from the former samurai classes and by those well-to-do persons who can keep up with it. Special culture is necessary to appreciate it, and thus a certain economic and social position becomes a prerequisite to the proper understanding of that art. The kabuki drama began as a theatre enterprise among the townspeople, who were among the lower classes of the feudal era. This element of popularity is still retained, but because of its long tradition the kabuki now has become classic. Some advance preparation is necessary here, too, for the proper appreciation of kabuki dramas and by custom the performances last five or six hours each day. Spectators must pay high admissions on behalf of a group of high-salaried stars. Accordingly, the kabuki is a source of amusement only for those above the common folks. The "new school" drama has unsuccessfully tried to present social plays and only has achieved limited popularity among those interested in the life and morals of characters in the lower walks of life, while the "new" drama finds its audience chiefly among the rising-generation intelligentsia because of its intended modern realism.

The ordinary salaried worker and factory man have neither the time nor the money to attend these performances, especially the nob and the kabuki shows. Most college and university students are excluded for the same reasons, and farm and village folks rarely have an opportunity to attend the theatre, which is centred in the big cities. Thus the great majority of the public has been excluded from the theatre which they could only enjoy for a few hours, in everyday clothes and at low admission fees. Motion pictures were imported and the dramatic films began to be produced in this country, eventually to meet the demands of 400,000,000 would-be theatre-goers.

This audience is interested not only in the actors and actresses, but also in the direction, supervision and production aspects of dramatic films, as well as the camera art. One often hears shop girls or factory workers criticizing the direction of a film or the manner in which it was photographed. And there are sixteen very prosperous dramatic film magazines published regularly in Japan. The first motion picture camera is said to have been brought to Japan in 1896. Production of dramatic films was begun in 1899. A dramatic film company was organized in 1912 with a capital of 10,000,000 yen and today there are twelve established dramatic film companies in operation.

Last April 7, there were 15,000 spectators in one of the numerous dramatic film theatres in Tokyo, which has a seating capacity of 3,000. There were three weeks' successful performances of a film styled as the "jidai geki," or historical drama of the two-sworded samurai days. The director was a noted authority in that line, the players were skilled in historical

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1 For particulars refer: "Development of the New Drama in Japan" by Tomoyoshi Munayama, Contemporary Japan, May, 1940, pp. 586-94.
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characterization and the playwright was a popular one, all of which bespeaks the characteristics of Japanese drama pictures of today. Historical films treat of the times preceding the Meiji Restoration, of the fighting men and the righteous poor people, their struggles against circumstances and their high sense of morality, their revenge and their chivalry. Always the sword is a dominant factor, sometimes as a symbol of justice, as a symbol of overwhelming force, a solution to fate or a cause of tragedy. The art of swordsmanship, here called "satsu-jin," has various forms and may be displayed by one man against another or by one man against many. In any case, the fighting must be beautiful and multiform, not omitting the thrill naturally attendant upon it, and the director pays such careful attention to it that the performance comes out so agreeably harmonic as to seem almost like a kind of dance. These sword fights never fail to please the public, which as a matter of fact has come to anticipate them. The triumph of the strong and just always appeals to the public.

Another type of old-time play called "matatabi mono," which is really a variation of the "jidai geiki," shows a man of dauntless chivalry, although of lowly birth, who is always ready to sacrifice even his life for his code of morals. He, too, is often a hero in sword-fighting, and although his skill may be less than that of a samurai, his spirit enables him to prevail over less noble characters, thus arousing a sense of justice in the spectator. Actors in these roles of the "jidai geiki," including "matatabi mono," must be highly specialized and often they are drawn from the ranks of kabuki players.

Why then do Japanese movie-goers enjoy these old-time dramas, the "jidai geiki," so different from everything surrounding their lives today? It is because they exaggerate the Japanese spirit and satisfy the popular desire to see might and justice prevail. Exaggeration and even occasional falsehood are ignored because the play deals with bygone days.

Modern drama, of course, offers another large field of dramatic film material. Like Western films, love is the main theme, but in Japanese films the family system is stressed. Modern Japanese dramas treat of the emotional crises arising inevitably from the family system, which may be said to be a characteristic. Relations between parents and children, brothers and sisters, succession to family leadership, mother love and marriage and all the psychological and emotional situations inherent in the family system are portrayed with peculiar modesty and passivity. The modern play often concerns tragedy caused by taciturnity or diffidence, by excessive sacrifices, but when these are offered as motion pictures they are a bit too sweet for those of delicate sensibilities. A movie scene is apt to end in suggestion, without adequate expression, which may be one reason why foreigners find them difficult to understand.

But Japanese spectators commonly weep at modern motion pictures, making up the deficient scenes in their minds. This sentimentality is a deep sympathy for the stoics whose wish for peace and harmony falter at no sacrifice of self, as long as no harm comes to some one else. The works of present-day writers are often filmed for pictures of this kind, especially the serial stories in newspapers and magazines. A novel which has been favourably received is always welcomed as a motion picture.

As home and family are the main factors in the modern play, women have the important roles and actresses become popular idols. There are no actresses in the kabuki theatre, but they appeared on the screen for the first time in 1918 and now they rank along with actors.

The cinema is an art form which all countries have in common. In Japan, however, it is used to express things which are unique in Japan, to create a sort of Japanese film play and thereby contribute to the film art of the world. In the world film exhibitions at Venice prizes were awarded to one Japanese film in 1938 and to four in 1939.