

THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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Wednesday 12th March - Sunday 16th March 2014

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The Hippodrome, 10 Hope Street, Bo'ness EH51 0AA

Saturday 15 March | 19:30

DRAGNET GIRL (MIJÔSEN NO ONNA)

Dir. Yasujiro Ozu | Japan | 1933 | b/w | 1h 36m

Accompanied live by Jane Gardner, Hazel Morrison and Roddy Long

Screening supported by Film Hub Scotland, part of BFI's Film Audience Network

Yasujiro Ozu's silent films reveal not just his early mastery of the medium but also the popular basis of his art. One of the greatest of Ozu's silent films, *Dragnet Girl* (1933) is a vigorous and stylish work that feels almost casual yet heartfelt. Ozu spins his little story (concocted by himself) of crime, love and redemption with skill while staying close to the concerns of the mass audience of early-1930s Japan, hungry for up-to-date thrills but ambivalent about the changes modernity had brought to the society.

For a 21st-century audience that knows Ozu mainly for his later masterworks such as *Late Spring* (1949), *Early Summer* (1951) and *Tokyo Story* (1953), the subject matter of *Dragnet Girl* may come as a shock. No doubt this melodrama of the criminal underworld appears aberrant in the career of a filmmaker renowned for his elegiac films about middle-class families. The late Donald Richie, a pioneer in Western appreciation of Japanese cinema, mentions *Dragnet Girl* only fleetingly in his book on Ozu. Even the director himself wrote in his diary that he felt ill at ease working on the film.

Ozu has been famously called "the most Japanese of directors," but *Dragnet Girl* takes place in a universe that denies Japanese-ness. At the office where the heroine, Tokiko (Kinuyo Tanaka), works during the day, typists use Remington typewriters; at the boxing gym where Tokiko's boyfriend, Joji (Joji Oka), hangs out and in the apartment the couple share, the walls are covered with posters for American boxing matches and Hollywood films (*The Champ* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*); the dance club where Tokiko and Joji spend their nights is conspicuously Western-style. (Ozu's cool modernism in *Dragnet Girl* anticipates by



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at least three decades the ironic appropriation of American attitudes and genres by Jean-Luc Godard in the 1960s and Rainer Werner Fassbinder in the 1970s.) Of the characters in *Dragnet Girl*, only young aspiring gangster Hiroshi (Hideo Mitsui) and his sister, Kazuko (Sumiko Mizukubo), live in a world that is recognisably, if vestigially, Japanese: Kazuko wears kimonos, Hiroshi wears, sometimes, a school uniform. Yet Kazuko also works in a music shop dominated by the figure of RCA Victor (and HMV) advertising icon Nipper the dog.

The struggle over a Japanese national soul in thrall to Western images is a subtext of *Dragnet Girl*, and the traditional values embodied by Kazuko influence the moral reawakening of Tokiko and Joji. But Ozu is no nationalist, and in filming this romantic triangle, he is less interested in cultural symbols than in emotions. By the way, not just Joji, but Tokiko, too, is drawn to Kazuko; this same-sex attraction becomes all but explicit when Tokiko walks toward Kazuko on a sidewalk, apparently to kiss her (though because the camera is close to street level, both women's faces are cut off by the top of the frame).

Ozu holds off as long as possible getting specific about Joji's criminal activities and has little interest in violent action (a fight between Joji and three enemies takes place off-screen; another fight is obscured by foreground figures). Like Josef von Sternberg in his landmark gangster films (which Ozu surely had seen), Ozu uses the gangland trappings of his plot to render the story more exotic, unreal, and abstract, so as to give the audience untrammelled access to the characters' emotions. He is well served by his cast. Joji Oka's freezing narcissism suits the mood of the film; Hideo Mitsui, making the first of many appearances in Ozu films, is forthright and appealing; and Sumiko Mizukubo, who was called "Japan's Sylvia Sidney," cuts a striking figure in one of the handful of her films that have survived. Above all, Kinuyo Tanaka, one of the greatest Japanese film stars, is at her early peak in *Dragnet Girl*, giving a vibrant and moving performance that Ozu places at the centre of every scene.

Chris Fujiwara is Artistic Director of the Edinburgh International Film Festival.



Dragnet Girl is a new commission supported by Film Hub Scotland, part of BFI's Film Audience Network, and will tour Scotland in Spring/Summer 2014