

# Elevating The Ordinary

BY MICHAEL SIMS

**IN THE OPENING SCENE** of Yasujiro Ozu's "Tokyo Story," Shukichi and Tomi Hirayama are packing for a train ride to Japan's capital from their home in provincial Onomichi.

"This is our chance to see all our children," Shukichi, the husband and father, remarks to a neighbor.

"They must be looking forward to your arrival," she replies.

Although he was not yet 50 years old, the acclaimed actor Chishu Ryu played Shukichi as elderly and rather frail. "Well," he replies cautiously, "I hope so."

Shukichi and his wife, beautifully played by Chieko Higashiyama, soon find that their grown children are not eager to see, lodge and feed them during this visit. Nor are the parents thrilled with their children's behavior and life choices. They even find their feral grandchildren tiresome. "Tokyo Story" seems made for adults because it is about mixed feelings among ordinary people—no heroes, no villains, just frustrated mortals. "Isn't life disappointing?" one character asks late in the story, and receives a resigned smile and the admission, "Yes, it is." It is a testament to Ozu's artistry that out of grief and disappointment, out of mute rituals and analgesic chat, he builds a universal tale.

Ozu makes clear the family's dis-

content and their failure to stay connected before hitting them and us with the death of their most beloved member. Without histrionics, he aims his unblinking attention at the ordinary. In its elegance and balance, this movie rises above even the notable accomplishments of Ozu's other films, such as "Late Spring."

Nowadays the roster of best-film finalists usually includes giants such as "Vertigo," "Citizen Kane," "The Godfather" and "Tokyo Monogatari" ("Tokyo Story"). In the West, even now, Ozu's 1953 triumph is the least known, but in a 2012 "Sight and Sound" poll directors from around the world accorded it first place. As the 136-minute story leisurely unfolds, viewers new to Ozu may be puzzled at first about his inclusion alongside dramatic filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles and Francis Ford Coppola. There are no chases up bell towers, no sly breakfast montages, no beheaded horses.

Nor does a Hitchcockian camera swoop down a flight of stairs to find a key in an actor's hand. Howard Hawks, the American director of "The Big Sleep" and "Rio Bravo," argued—admittedly, before Steadicam was invented—that the camera should move only when action demands it. Ozu agreed. But he wasn't pursuing the chimera of directorial invisibility; his



**Chishu Ryu and Chieko Higashiyama in the film.**

"realism" is as mannered as Vermeer's. He simply rejected those narrative conventions

that stood between him and his humane vision.

A frame of an Ozu film is as distinctive as a page of Virginia Woolf. By placing his camera at waist- or even knee-level, in what are now called "tatami shots," Ozu seats the viewer among his characters. This practice disconcerts Westerners. Japanese viewers, however, know that the social interaction that Ozu portrayed in his later movies took place among groups of people seated and kneeling on mats.

Ozu rejected other filmmaking norms. From Hollywood to Paris, reaction shots—made by shooting over each actor's shoulder—were shuffled together during editing. Western di-

rectors quickly adapted to this convention. Japan in general and Ozu in particular resisted. Thus he did not bother to maintain the "eye line" between characters. Often, to portray the then-common Japanese distaste for gazing confrontationally into the eyes of an interlocutor, he arranged a tableau in which characters speak intimately while seated side-by-side. And now and then actors speak directly into the camera—not breaking the fourth wall, just situating us in another character's place.

Often, like Welles in "Citizen Kane," Ozu conveyed the poignant juxtapositions of real life through deep focus in a carefully planned foreground and background, without the artifice of cuts between camera shots. He has infinite patience. With divine attention, he superintends every frame. Observing a scene before characters arrive or

lingering after they depart lends the viewer a ghostly permanence that outlasts theirs. We feel omnipresent in their cosmos, privy to all its secrets, like the angels in "Wings of Desire," by Ozu disciple Wim Wenders.

Another fulcrum for "Tokyo Story" beside the Hirayamas is their former daughter-in-law, Noriko, played by the radiant Setsuko Hara. Their son, her husband, died eight years earlier, a casualty of the war. Ozu revisited favorite themes, scriptwriters, crews and actors. He featured Hara in five other films. "Tokyo Story" is the third in which she plays a character named Noriko—but not quite the same Noriko in each. Through this unofficial "Noriko trilogy," Ozu and co-writer Kogo Noda explore how a young woman's life might play out under different circumstances: in a prearranged marriage, with an ailing father, as a war widow.

Ozu's characters perform their organic ballet amid the Mondrian geometry of Japanese interiors—doors and windows, shoji screens, tansu cabinets. Characters come and go, even die, while the setting remains. The Japanese call a melancholy awareness of the ephemeral nature of life *mono no aware*, and Ozu's humanity grows from that nourishing soil. Thanks to art's ancient way of evoking the universal through the particular, we are won over by (and return to) "Tokyo Story" because in watching these characters' lives we find ourselves watching our own more closely.

*Mr. Sims's books include "Adam's Navel" and "The Adventures of Henry Thoreau."*