

THE LIVES AND CRIMES OF OKADA YOSHIKO

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Dusk, on the third day of January, 1938. Two kilometers north of the Russo-Japanese border on Sakhalin Island, the garrison of a small Soviet blockhouse was startled by the sudden appearance of two figures struggling toward them through waist deep snow. One was a Japanese man with round glasses and a briefcase clutched at his chest. The other was a fashionably dressed, strikingly attractive woman.

The man stopped and in quavering, but intelligible Russian called out, "We are friends, not hostile intruders! We are members of the Japanese Communist Party and have crossed the border with an important communication for the Comintern!"

The man was Sugimoto Ryokichi, 32, a rising young director in Japan's left-oriented "Proletarian Drama" Movement. To this day it is not clear whether what he said was the truth. His companion was Okada Yoshiko, 36, one of the best-known stage and screen actresses in Japan at the time. Why she was there is also subject to conflicting interpretations.

The two were immediately arrested and hustled off to G. P. U. headquarters for intensive questioning. Five days later, on January 8, the Japanese consulate in Alexandrovsk relayed to Japan the first official confirmation of their flight. The newspapers, however, had already seized upon the story and were trumpeting it as the sensation of the century.

In the ultranationalist environment of the era, a segment of the Japanese press presented the incident as an act of unspeakable treason. The China Incident had already begun and the government had issued a "Universal Mobilization Order" designed to absorb the energies and talents of the entire population and put them in service to the war effort. Prominent literary figures, like Hino Ashihei, Ishikawa Tatsuzo and Hayashi Fumiko had been "drafted" into the so-called Pen Detachment and were being sent off to the front to find some transcendent meaning in the conflict and to work up the sights and sensations they experienced there into a new style of "reportage" literature. Actors and actresses were flocking to China to perform for the troops. All of the nation's news and dramatic film companies were fielding large crews there in order to record the

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thrilling events for patriotic viewers at home. The newspapers were already depicting the expanding incident as a “holy war” against an enemy (Chiang Kai Shek) who was really only the puppet of far more sinister Powers.

Therefore it was an act of incredible perfidy for a Japanese citizen to actually desert to one of these Powers, the satanic Soviet Union. Since Sugimoto was already a well-known, seditionist — and was in fact on probation at the time of his desertion — it was easy for the press to focus on the dark treasonableness of his motives. But Okada Yoshiko was another matter altogether. Her public image had been marred time and again by sordid scandals and spectacular breaches of the marriage vow. Even as she approached middle-age, she continued to be called “that flaming woman.” But, as an actress and a dedicated artist, she had an enormous following. Not only had she provided Japan with some of its greatest theatre since the death of Matsui Sumako, she had created a stage and screen personality known and adored by millions of fans. Only the most hysterical or reactionary of the journalists could conceive of a dedicated Red lurking beneath that personality. In fact, the very first press reports were phrased as if Yoshiko had been the victim of some dreadful accident. She (and her companion) had “disappeared into the deep wintry snows” and it was “feared” that she may have passed beyond the border. When it became known that she had “gone over” voluntarily, the public’s outrage was mixed with a good deal of sadness and bewilderment.

Okada Yoshiko was a true revolutionary, but of a very different, very personal kind. The history of her career, at least up to her flight into exile, is closely intertwined with the development of Japan’s popular culture and its “counter culture” during the first third of this century.

Born in 1902, Yoshiko grew up in a family atmosphere which encouraged her headstrong, artistic ambitions. She was an only child and was pampered and groomed by her young, intellectual parents. Her mother, Yae, had dreamed of becoming a lady novelist, but circumstances had intervened, forcing her to take up the life of a proper housewife instead. These dreams she then transferred to her daughter’s career. Yoshiko’s father, Takeo, agreed with the idea of making the girl into a writer. He himself was a frustrated author who had taken up newspaper work when his own first novel failed to materialize.

The Japan of Yoshiko’s childhood was alive with intellectual ferment. Under the influence of French naturalism, both the novel and the theatre were being utterly transformed. The new, Europeanized theatre movement had turned its back on almost everything Japanese and was staging only plays in translation. In 1907, when Yoshiko was

five, the great Tsubouchi Shoyo started the movement (called *Shingeki* or "New Theatre") by establishing his *Bungei Kyokai*. It was in a direct descendant of this organization that Yoshiko was to start her own career as a Shingeki actress.

But Yoshiko's earliest inclinations were toward painting. In the first of many disappointments for her doting parents, she refused to attend the Girl's English Academy as they had planned for her. Her insurrection was successful and she entered the Tokyo Girl's School for Western Painting in 1915. At thirteen, she had already established the pattern of impulsive decisions, often in the face of all common sense, which would guide her life as an adult. Almost from the start, she was the mistress of her own (and of many other's) fate.

Despite his good intentions, Yoshiko's father was often the cause of terrible upheavals in her early family life. Once, an article he wrote got him into trouble with the military and he disappeared to parts unknown for almost a year. He was also a demon for moving and seemed incapable of keeping his family rooted in the same spot for more than twelve months at a time. From Hiroshima, the family went on to Korea, from there to Kyushu, and then to Tokyo. Takeo was as restless in mind as he was in body. In his youth he had fervently embraced Unitarianism only to abandon it for the faith of militant political liberalism. When Yoshiko was in grade school, for example he insisted that she stay home on those days set aside for schoolwide ceremonies reverencing the Emperor. It also was at this time that a minor incident drove him to an unsuccessful suicide attempt.

This event proved to be a turning point in Yoshiko's life. Shocked by what her father had tried, she was momentarily awakened to the sacrifices her parents were making for her. The decision she came to, however, could only have staggered those poor people. The logic was uniquely Okada Yoshiko and had best be followed in her own words:

How could I go on in such a carefree manner? How could I paint pictures which cost my dear parents so much for the materials? This was all probably the doings of fate. I was already fourteen. I'd seize the opportunity and set out to work on my own. A hope began to float through my mind. It was... to become a great actress!^{1.)}

Even Yoshiko could not easily persuade them to accept this turn. Partly with the intention of wheedling consent out of her father, she went to join him in Hokkaido where he had taken a post on the *Otaru Hokumon Nippo*. In April, 1918, Yoshiko herself came on staff as a lady journalist. Her beat included the activities of local grade schools and

events of special interest to female readers. The father-daughter journalist team seemed to work for a while, but then, in November of that year, a group of Hokkaido newspaper people formed an amateur theatre troupe, The Century Players, and Yoshiko was given a part in their first production. She became the sensation of the show and this rekindled her ambitions for a stage career. Overwhelmed by the girl's enthusiasm, Takeo relented. In 1920, he escorted Yoshiko (now age 18) to Tokyo and enrolled her in the Butai Kyokai Theatre's training program. Fortunately for Yoshiko, her father's peripatetic literary career had brought him into contact with many of the artistic leaders of era, among them Nakamura Kichizo, the leader of the theatre group.

In 1914, Tsubouchi's *Bungei Kyokai* had to fold because of a scandalous love affair between its leading actress, Matsui Sumako and her director, Shimamura Hogetsu (both were married to other people at the time). Soon afterward, Sumako and Hogetsu founded their own company and immediately achieved a stupendous triumph with *Fuk-katsu*, their version of the Tolstoy story *Resurrection* (the same story was soon after brought to the screen, as *Katchusha*, but with *oyama* rather than actresses). Although Hogetsu and Sumako were still "living in sin" at the time, their combination of talents created success after success. Then, suddenly, Hogetsu sickened and died. Without her consort, Sumako had trouble controlling her actors. Her suicide in 1920 was a national *cause celebre*.

At the close of the same year, Okada Yoshiko entered the theatre world. So similar were the characters of the two women, the interval between the death of Sumako and the rise of Yoshiko has been called "the intermission between two great acts in Shingeki history."²)

Yoshiko's training at the *Butai Kyokai* under Nakamura quickly bore fruit. As luck would have it, almost immediately upon entering the program, a vacancy came up in the chorus line for the troupe's version of *Carmen*. Despite Nakamura's trepidations about casting a complete beginner, Yoshiko was drafted for the part. Therefore, playing one of the dancers in the bar scene of the second act, she made her debut on the professional stage. Within a year newspapers began noticing her bit parts and were talking about "this neophyte with a future." When the company took to the road to tour Japan, however, Yoshiko's father refused to allow her to go along. Then the leading lady suddenly became ill in the provinces and the troupe had to undergo a reshuffling of parts. When Yoshiko was implored to help out on stage, her parents found it impossible to stand in her way. By mid-April, she was already a full-fledged member of the *Kyokai* travelling the Tohoku circuit.

Then disaster struck. Like most young ladies of her generation, Yoshiko was presumably chaste in both mind and body. But, unlike her “nicer” peers, she was driven by the bold curiosity of an adventuress. Out of sexual curiosity, rather than romantic attachment, she slept with a fellow actor and immediately became pregnant. Her partner was Hattori Yoshiharu, a youth still nominally enrolled in the preparatory course for Waseda University. He and Yoshiko had spent many hours together in training classes run by the Kyokai’s venerable instructor, Kato Seiichi. As would happen time and again, Yoshiko allowed the passions summoned up for the stage to pass into her private life.

While modern morality can take the above incident in stride, the frigid cruelty of what followed can only shock us. Yoshiko arranged for her father to come to the rescue. It was he who handled all the maternal details and hid them from public view. In the meantime, Yoshiko came to hate Hattori, the young father, and blamed him for the calamity he had “inflicted” upon her career and spurned all further communication with him. Hiroshi, the child born in February 1921 of their unfortunate union, was ultimately registered as the son of Yoshiko’s parents. The boy continued to believe this deception until he was fourteen. Up till then and even afterwards—when in public, at least—he called his real mother, “sister.”

In any case, Yoshiko hardened her resolve to become a great actress after this initial derailment. In 1921, not long after bearing Hiroshi, she starred in a Tokyo University Theatre Club production of *Shi to Sambun (Poetry and Prose)*, under the assumed name “Kuroda Mitsuko.” She was smash hit.

That very summer also marked her abortive entrance into film. She was approached by a group of Keio University undergrads to co-star in a film to be called “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.” Yamamoto Kajiro, later a famous director, was her romantic opposite. As Yamamoto was later to recall:

The film was shot at the old Taisho Katsudo Shashin studios in Yokohama. The “Taikatsu” company had already failed, along with the Film Research Association. At the time, Okada Yoshiko, the shining star of the Butai Kyokai, was wandering loose, and so Suzuki Toshi—who at the time was a kind of quack pastor—set his sights on her for our production. Suzuki was the one who brought together all the various talents for the film, sweeping them up from the above-mentioned bankrupt organizations and fusing them together into his “Suzuki Productions.” From Taikatsu came Okada Yoshihiko, Hayama Michiko and others. Besides Okada Yoshiko, he managed to assemble a star-studded cast out of Butai Kyokai dropouts—But after all our work, the development labs botched their end of the job and not a single image could be discerned on the screen. It was just blackness followed by blackness. That, as you can imagine, put an end to any commercial dreams we had for the project.^{3.)}

Right in the middle of location shooting for the film, Hattori appeared on the scene pleading with Yoshiko to marry him. When she rebuffed him, there was a scuffle as he chased her through the neighborhood, trying to slash her with a knife. Hattori, who was already ill with tuberculosis, was clearly losing his mind. More ugly scenes occurred as he tried vainly to win Yoshiko back. Finally, two years later, when he realized that he had lost her to another lover, the poor man threw himself in front of a train.

In October of 1921, the *Butai Kyokai*, which had suspended performances, was revived by Mori Eijiro and Sasaki Tsumoru. Yamada Takaya, another of the troupe's key figures, overcame the fierce objections of the others and cast Yoshiko as the leading lady in his production of *Shukke to Sono Deshi* (*The Bonze and His Disciple*). Yamada himself played the young priest while Yoshiko played the geisha, Kaede. For five straight nights in November, their steamy love scenes on stage mesmerized standing-room-only crowds at the large Yurakuza Theatre. When the play was held over for another four nights, there was such a surge of patrons outside the building that a squad of policemen had to be dispatched to man the sawhorses on the sidewalk to keep them under control. Overnight, Yoshiko had blossomed into a major star, sharing larger-than-life billboards with her new benefactor.

The duo continued to star together in smash-hit productions of *Omoide* (*Memories*) and *Chichi no Shimpai* (*Fears of a Father*) during the spring 1922 season. Then, when the two went on the road with their *piece de resistance*, *The Bonze and His Disciple*, a rumor began to spread that the two were now lovers in real life as well. The revelation proved most unfortunate for Yamada's company.

The life of a dramatic company is pathetically dependent upon the purse of its patrons and Yamada's had been heavily bankrolled by by a certain dowager romantically interested in Yamada-the-man. When the lady heard of his new lover, the purse suddenly snapped shut. After that, it was not long before the company was once again in the red.

By this time, Yamada and Yoshiko were all but man and wife. When Nikkatsu Film Studios approached Yoshiko and the rest of the company in 1923, Yamada jumped at the idea as an excellent way to return their own company to the boards. Nikkatsu—which had continued to hold to arch-conservative production techniques long after rival companies had begun the switch over to the “Hollywood look”—was in the midst of a painful transition. The company had remained one of the last bastions of the *oyama* (female impersonators)—relics from the dawn of cinema in Japan. In 1922, the company

dared to challenge their position within the company by establishing a small pool of real *female* actresses. The *oyama*, in a towering snit, tried to punish the company by storming off the lot and into the waiting arms of the Kokkatsu Company. Nikkatsu seized upon the opportunity to formally disavow the use of *oyama* in all further productions and to go with real actresses exclusively. The urgent need for seasoned actresses caused the company to turn to the *Butai Kyokai*. In this way, Yamada Takaya, Okada Yoshiko, along with Natsukawa Shizue and Mori Eijiro, won a stunning ten thousand yen group-contract from Nikkatsu for the production of three films. Their first film, clearly based on *The Bonze and his Disciple*, was a tale of a young wandering priest who suffers the torments of love. Scripted and directed by Tanaka Eizo (an old-guard Nikkatsu figure who was rapidly evolving along with his company into a daring exponent of cinematic Modernism), the film, *Dokuro no Mai* (*Dance of the Skulls*, 1923), cast Yamada as the love-demented priest and Yoshiko as the country maid Okinu. During the shooting of a mid-winter snow scene on location, Yoshiko nearly froze to death and had to retire from the other two productions for which she and her company had been contracted.^{4.)} Fortunately, Nikkatsu was so pleased with their work that they renewed for another set of films. In *Yama no Higeiki* (*Mountain Tragedy*, 1923), with Suzuki Kensaku directing, the lovely maiden played by Yoshiko meets a dreadful end at the hands of a jealous hunchback.

Then, just as she and her comrades were heading off to Karuizawa to start location shooting on their next film, the Great Kanto Earthquake devastated the Kanto region. With Nikkatsu's Mukojima Studios in a complete shambles, the contract had to be terminated. All of Yokohama and most of Tokyo had been turned into a vast scorched plain. Still, as visitors were startled to discover in the weeks following the disaster, there was still life among the smokey ruins. In the Yurakucho entertainment district, part of the concrete train trestle leading into Tokyo Station still stood. The *Butai Kyokai* put up makeshift partitions under the trestle and set themselves up as a "cafe." With Yoshiko herself working as a part-time waitress in the jerry-built establishment, the place became the haunt of well-to-do patrons. One of the city's best Western cuisine chefs stood behind an open grill, turning out sizzling steaks at a hefty two and a half yen apiece.^{5.)}

In December of that year, the troupe pulled itself together to put on performances of Yamamoto Yuzo's *Seimei no Kanmuri* (*The Crown of Life*) and Mushanokoji's *Nojima Sensei no Yume* (*Dr. Nojima's Dream*) using the Imperial Hotel auditorium which had miraculously escaped destruction.

Okada Yoshiko's return to the screen in the 1925 Nikkatsu production *Machi no*

Tejinashi (The Street Magician) was a major triumph. The director was Murata Minoru, one of the leading figures in Osanai Kaoru's Shingeki movement and a major force in creative Japanese cinema in the early twenties. Between 1921 and 1922, he and Osanai had been the guiding lights at Shochiku's new *Kinema Geijutsu Kenkyusho*, where they turned out the epic-making film *Souls on the Road*. In 1924, Murata moved to Nikkatsu where he made his starkly realistic *Seisaku no Tsuma (Seisaku's Wife)*. In *Street Magician*, however, he did an about-face and began experimenting with German-style Expressionism (the latter was in vogue at Nikkatsu at the time, with both Tanaka Eizo and Mizoguchi Kenji dabbling with chiarascuro sets and moody lighting). The script, written by the Americaphile Mori Iwao, reflected a hodgepodge of influences from Ernst Lubitsch and F. W. Murnau to Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid*. Yet, for an era still steeped in *Shimpa*-derived screen plays, it was considered both refreshing and startling. Yoshiko plays a pathetic waitress who is seduced and made pregnant by a man who then deserts her in order to marry into wealth. All the while, the girl had been loved by a street magician — played by Kondo Iyokichi, an actor whose charm was his aura of intense intellectuality. He saves the girl from attempted suicide and then takes out after her evil seducer, whom he shoots dead in the midst of his wedding festivities. The magician is himself fatally wounded and he dies in the loving embrace of the girl. Although the plot stayed well within the traditions of the tear-jerker, its bizarre twists and Yoshiko's appealing portrayal made it the major *gendaigeki*-sensation of the year. Later that year, Murata and his script-writer Mori Iwao proudly carried it off to Europe where they hoped demonstrate Japanese film's "coming of age" to foreign audiences. They were to be sorely disappointed, since the only screening it received was for an audience of indifferent Japanese businessmen in Germany.^{6.)} But for Yoshiko, the film represented an advance into the first rank of Japan's screen actresses. Her salary of five hundred yen a month never rivalled that of Kurishima Sumiko, filmdom's reigning queen, but it did provide a most comfortable living indeed.

Yoshiko's next film project brought her into direct rivalry with Kurishima: *Daichi wa Hohoemu (The Great Earth Smiles, 1925)*. Three versions — made as part of a three-way competition between Nikkatsu (which starred Yoshiko), Shochiku (which starred Kurishima) and Tokatsu — came out at the same time, based upon the same novel serialized in *Osaka Mainichi Shimbun* by Yoshida Momonosuke. In contrast to Kurishima's placid sweetness, Yoshiko's version of the part had a different kind of attractiveness which appealed to the nation's film-going intellectuals.

In 1926, Yoshiko was back with Murata, with whom she made *Nichirin (The Sun)*.

The results were so unfavorably received that Yoshiko suddenly went sour on film acting. Iwasaki Akira, an extraordinarily articulate young film critic whose opinions weighed heavily with the fashionably "left" crowd (representing the very core of Yoshiko's fandom) labeled her "an utter, a dismal failure" in her part. Next, he struck at her where it hurt most: her female vanity. "She is nothing more than a typical female of the pre-1920 period trying to appear 'modern' in a late twenties production. She's an anachronism. One look at those sharply sloping shoulders and you can see how far she diverges from the 'modern.' She was the swollen belly of a woman eight months into a pregnancy — rather than anything of the virginal about her, she appears far gone into decadance!"^{7.)} Of course not everyone shared Iwasaki's violent displeasure. Osanai Kaoru, writing for *Eiga Jidai*, rated her performance as "B+".

Not long afterward, Yoshiko participated in a discussion with the novelist Tanizaki Jun'ichiro (whose credentials as a "film-person" had been established by his scripting of *The Amateur Club*, the celebrated Japanese film debut of Kurihara Thomas in 1920). The discussion was reprinted in the November, 1926 edition of *Eiga Jidai*. Yoshiko's comments about her screen career were so despondent that Tanizaki was moved to ask, "So you intend to give up your film career?" "Well," she replied, "I really don't know what I'm going to do." Then, with a typically "Okada Yoshiko" ellipsis in reasoning, she announced, "You may think I'm just bluffing, but I want to become a director! It seems to me to be limiting somehow just to be an actress. At the same time, when it comes to a woman directing, well, we're very good at the little details but we're not that good at pulling it together into a whole."^{8.)} If nothing else, this discussion reveals the state of her mind as she approached another of the many big turn-about in her professional life.

Yoshiko's private life was also ripening for a change. Tensions were beginning to smoulder between herself and her common-law husband, Yamada Takaya. Yamada had returned briefly to the stage. But his luck was failing and he was depending ever more heavily on Yoshiko for financial support. Yoshiko, in turn, saw him as a burden and took to criticizing him for his interference in her career. As always, when Yoshiko discovered that she was stronger than the man in her life, her first impulse was to push him out altogether. Yoshiko nearly always obeyed these "first impulses."

In fact, at the time, Yoshiko was in the midst of a revolt against two men: Yamada and her director, Murata. The latter belonged to that school of directing which held actresses and actors to be nothing more than so much raw material to be "creatively moulded" by the authorial director. Following a pattern common among his Hollywood peers, Murata planned the actions and expressions of his acting staff down to the

minutest detail, treating them as mere puppets. Yoshiko, who considered herself a true *artiste*, found this method demeaning. She minced no words in informing Murata of how she felt. Collisions followed in rapid succession with Yoshiko often rushing off the set—and sometimes completely off the lot—in tears. The enmity she built up against Murata at this time would continue to span half a century; in her autobiography *Kui Naki Inochi O (A Life Without Regrets, 1973)*, she remembers Murata as “one of those types who closed his ears to his actors and kept them shut.”^{9.)}

Events culminated in mid-1927 during the shooting of *Tsubaki Hime* (Lady Camellia). Nikkatsu, apparently unaware of any conflict on the set, was supremely confident that the film would be a major hit and had invested itself to the hilt. Now starring in her seventeenth film, Yoshiko was playing opposite the handsome young Takeuchi Ryoichi, the scion of one of the great baronial families of Japan.

Then, one day, just as the cameras were about to roll, Murata discovered both his stars to be among the missing. Nearly hysterical with rage, he ordered a massive search. The police were called in and, as a last resort, they dragged the bottom of nearby Lake Biwa for bodies. But still no Takeuchi, no Yoshiko.

Murata, who was a painfully shy and withdrawn man, may well have been in love with Yoshiko, despite their strained relations. Jealousy, perhaps, drove him to denounce her and her lover to the Nikkatsu directorate for breach of contract. A strict company rule of the time forbade romantic liaisons among its stars. To break this rule meant immediate expulsion from the company.

Three days passed. Then a week. The newspapers sniffed the story and figured they were onto a love suicide. Soon the police began a massive search of the nation.

The secret trysting place of the two was discovered on the tenth day. Seated stiffly before flash-bulb-popping reporters in a Kyushu hotel room, they confessed they had become lovers.

A maelstrom of abuse then descended upon the two. They were both terminated by Nikkatsu and Yoshiko was branded with the scarlet letters of “slut” in front of outraged public. Again her erotic activity had brought her career into eclipse—but, as noted above, it may well have been an eclipse she had half-willingly brought on herself.

Soon afterward, Yoshiko and Takeuchi—now disinherited by his father, the Baron—were married. Yamada was simply tossed aside like some worn-out garment. Then, in September of the same year, the newly-weds formed the Okada Yoshiko-za Theatrical Company.

With her career in the balance, Yoshiko plunged into this new venture. Finally,

the desperately hard work paid off. "The Dotombori March," where Yoshiko was featured dancing the Charleston, was a fabulous success. More successful productions followed — many of them marred, however, by boos and hisses from the individuals in the audience who had come simply to harass Takeuchi and his "immoral" wife. Such "triumphs" were costly in spirit. Taking the show around Japan and then to Korea, China and Taiwan, Yoshiko gradually tired of such "popular" dramas and longed for a more elevated form of art.

In April of 1930, Yoshiko and Takeuchi returned to Tokyo almost dead with exhaustion. Their Theatre Company was dissolved and they began looking for new opportunities. They hit upon the idea of producing 16mm talkies—sound movies were just beginning to trickle into the country from abroad—and they established "Okada Yoshiko Productions." The fare they turned out was even more philistine than their stage productions had been: short "musicals" like *Kanda Kouta* and *Edo Komori Uta*.¹⁰⁾ Then, in February of 1932, Yoshiko and Takeuchi were welcomed into the Shochiku Company.

Yoshiko made her "comeback" to the big screen in Nomura Hotei's *Hito Wana* (*Human Trap*, 1932), followed by another Nomura feature, *Chichi Shimai* (*Foster Sisters*, 1932). Critics found both pictures "absolutely antique" in look and acting style. Nomura was, after all, an antique himself. He disgusted Yoshiko by advising her that "your face gets all crumpled up when you open your mouth to speak or cry; keep it impassive. All you have to do it look pretty, you know." More low class melodramas and flimsy comedies followed. The single exception was a superior film she did with Ozu Yasujiro: *Mata Au Hi Made* (*Until Me Meet Again*, 1932), in which Yoshiko played a prostitute who must see off her lover as he departs for the front. The Manchurian Incident, which had begun the year before, was sending ripples through the film world, causing the mass-production of hysterically patriotic (and often thanotopic) war features. Ozu's film, however, stood away from this tendency and even managed to imply a softly anti-war theme. Aside from this, however, Yoshiko's return to cinema was providing her with precious little in the way of artistic satisfaction. The only other interruption in the succession of pot-boilers was the work she did with director Shimazu Yasujiro, who was in top form during this period. In her first film with him, *Naki-nureta Haru no Onna Yo* (*Oh, You Weeping Women of Spring*, 1933)—Shimazu's first real talkie—she played a wandering prostitute. In Shimazu's classic *Tonari no Yaechan* (*Our Neighbor Miss Yae*, 1934), Yoshiko found herself reduced to a mere bit part, while Aizome Yumeko starred. Then, moving over to Shochiku's *Jidaigeki* studios at Shimogamo, Yoshiko managed to distinguish herself in Kinugasa Teinosuke's *Ippon Gatana Dohyo Iri* (*With One Sword In the Ring*,

1934). With Hayashi Chojiro (Hasegawa Kazuo) as her leading man, she played Ocho—a part that had already been refined by a host of earlier actresses and *oyama*; Yoshiko's version was perhaps a bit too “modern” for some¹¹⁾, but it left a lasting impression on others. Still, Yoshiko found herself longing to return to the stage.

Furthermore, Takeuchi, who had joined Shochiku with her, was beginning to lose his touch as a screen actor. This time, artistic disappointment caused a gradual estrangement between Yoshiko and her man. Takeuchi wilted under her stern disapproval. Before long, he was a drink-sodden derelict of his former self. As Yoshiko was later to observe about herself: “I seem to be the kind of woman who destroys men.”

It was clearly time for a change. In another of her instinctive decisions, she stopped making films altogether. After all, she now had an offer from the dramatic company of Inoue Masao to return to *real* acting.

Shingeki, in the meantime, had gone through a complete cycle in its kaleidoscopic career. Its “Golden Age”, under Tsubouchi, had been brought to an abrupt end by the twin disasters of the Great Kanto Earthquake and the advent of world-wide depression. The bright, liberal optimism of the twenties withered under the ominous clouds of the thirties.

The new phase, that of “Proletarian Drama,” was to be a brief one. As with the short-lived “Tendency Films” in cinema, Japanese theatre was being inundated with “social awareness.” Under Hijikata Yoshi, the new dynamo of Shingeki, young militant actors and directors were coming to the fore.

Among these new-face directors was Sugimoto Ryokichi. In 1927, he had dropped out of the Russian literature program at Waseda University and followed Hijikata into the Zen'ei Gekijo—a group which was just then being formed under the novelist-playwright Murayama Tomoyoshi. When this group folded, Sugimoto followed Murayama into his next venture: The Tokyo Left Wing Theatre. In June of 1931, Sugimoto joined the Communist Party.

Then in April 1932, right in the midst of rehearsals for his play *Shimura Natsue*, Murayama was arrested for “violation of the Peace Protection Law.” Sugimoto, who was by now a close associate, took warning and went underground. In July of the next year, however, the secret police caught up with him as he strolled a street in his neighborhood. In December 1934, Sugimoto was tried and sentenced to four years probation (this, of course, was after serving a year and a half detention in the “pig box”).

In the face of overwhelming repression, the nation's leftist theatre people tried to find a way to continue their activities legally. This meant discovering some “middle

way". The search brought Sugimoto into close contact with Inoue Masao's "bourgeois" theatre group, and with Okada Yoshiko.¹²⁾

The attraction between Yoshiko and this man—four years her junior and with a bed-ridden wife at home—was to follow a familiar pattern. He first appeared on the scene as a savior. Yoshiko, who had been away from the boards during this important transition period, was not familiar with the new "realism" which had come to dominate acting techniques. In August 1936, she appeared as Otsu in Miyoshi Juro's *Hikoroku Ooi ni Warau* (*Hikoroku Laughs Long*) at Tokyo's big Meiji-za Theatre. The reaction of the critics stung her badly; but even more painful was the obvious disapproval of her fellow actors within the troupe. She was in a near frenzy when Sugimoto stepped in with the suggestion that he tutor her in the new Stanislavsky School ... privately.

As her director in *New Moon Story*, Sugimoto worked round the clock to initiate her into the mysteries of "the Method." The inevitable violent love affair ensued. Since Yoshiko and her husband were now living separately, it was not long before the director was a regular visitor to her apartment.

There was more than one reason for keeping these meetings furtive. Yoshiko, of course, needed to keep her private life hidden from the ever-prurient Japanese press. But, more importantly, Sugimoto was a marked man. Long a member of Nichiro, a left wing worker's party, he was a kind of man the ultranationalists were trying to exterminate.

The latter part of the thirties was an era of anguish for Japan. Important capitalists, princes of the Blood and even Prime Ministers were assassinated. Now, the whole nation was in the hands of the "Reform" (fascist) bureaucrats who took a special interest in "controlling" national culture. The hopeful blossoming of progressive art was being obliterated while many of its leaders were contritely undergoing *tenko* (political conversion). For intellectuals, especially, the key phrase was "Don't miss the bus!"—don't be left behind, isolated and vulnerable, as the nation marches toward its rendezvous with destiny.

Hijikata, who only a few short years earlier had been presiding over the theatrical new wave, had gone into exile in Moscow. Sugimoto, too, yearned to flee and to join him there. But he hesitated. He just wasn't the sort of man to take such a plunge all alone.

Meanwhile, Yoshiko's assertive nature slowly began to dominate their relationship. Sugimoto, hitherto her teacher, seemed to plead with her to resolve his quandary. At first, Yoshiko was of two minds, herself. Suddenly, she came to one of her

instinctive decisions. Yes, she urged him, flight to the Soviet Union is the only possible solution. Then, apparently convincing herself as well, she volunteered to go with him.

Pretending to be on a pleasure trip to Sakhalin, the two managed to slip over the border with almost no problem. Thirty-four years later, in July 1972, the J. C. P.'s official organ *Akahata* issued a special booklet titled *The Japanese Communist Party's Fifty Years*, which contained a brief mention of the "mission" of the two. According to this publication, Yoshiko and Sugimoto had crossed the border "to make contact with the Comintern."^{13.)} However, no such dispatches were found in Sugimoto's briefcase when the G. P. U. examined it in January, 1938.

Yoshiko and Sugimoto were kept together for only a week during their questioning. Then the Soviets, apparently unsatisfied by the Japanese man's answers, took Sugimoto elsewhere for more extensive questioning. Yoshiko was never to see her lover again. Almost two years of silence passed. Finally word came that he had succumbed to tuberculosis.

The furore over the flight of the two dominated the 1938 New Year's season. One paper with a lurid account of the story found its way aboard a ferry carrying a troupe of itinerant performers from Honshu to Kyushu. It had been spread out to catch the crumbs of their meal. The picture below the headline attracted one of their number, a lad of sixteen. Reaching down, he swept it up with trembling hands. Then, unaccountably, tears began to roll down his cheeks. This, according to Okada Hiroshi, was the manner in which he first learned of his mother's unbelievable escapade.

Hiroshi had continued to believe that his mother was his sister until his grandfather's (Yoshiko's father's) death two years before. When the fourteen year old boy was told of Yoshiko's real identity, he recoiled with horror. In time shock turned into rebellion and the boy seemed close to becoming a juvenile delinquent. Yoshiko's estranged husband, Takeuchi, took over responsibility for the boy and adopted him semi-officially. But, since it proved virtually impossible to control the boy's anti-social behavior, Hiroshi was eventually handed on to another household. Not long afterwards, however, Hiroshi set out to become a traveling performer.

For almost two decades, nothing more was to be heard from Okada Yoshiko. In 1952, film critic Kishi Matsuo wrote a biography of her (as Chapter Three in his widely acclaimed *Nihon Eigajin-Den*) and published it in the March edition of *Eiga Hyoron*. In the last paragraph of his biography, he wrote: "And what has become of this Okada Yoshiko? There are some very uncertain rumors that she has married a Soviet military officer, has a child and is living a happy life. There are even some who claim it is she who

heads up the Russian broadcasting team which beams Japanese language programs to Japan. But there is no way to verify this either. All I can say for certain is that at the writing of this biography she has completely disappeared from our midst and we have no certain way of knowing whether she lives or is dead. It leaves one with a feeling of absolute desolateness."^{14.})

Then, in 1954, Yoshiko suddenly surfaced in Moscow. Only after a long, harrowing experience during the war years was she allowed to enter the Soviet capital. Despite the fact she was by then well into middle age, she was still burning with the desire to return to the stage.

While pining away in the provinces of Russia, she was reported to have learned the language by borrowing a Russian translation of the plays of Shakespeare from the local library and studying each word. Of course, she knew the plays by heart. Finally gaining entrance to the National Academy of Drama in Moscow (at age 54), she eventually graduated as a director, thereby fulfilling the seemingly impossible dream she had conveyed to Tanizaki Jun'ichiro many years before.

Okada Yoshiko made a nostalgic trip home to Japan in 1973. Welcomed by both Prime Minister Sato and the mayor of Tokyo, the account she gave them of her adventures left many puzzles unsolved. Over 70 at the time, she was as flamboyant and mysterious as ever. In April of that year she published her autobiography, *Kui Naki Inochi O*, through Koseido Press, and then she left to return to the Soviet Union the following month. In February of 1975, she came back to Japan to appear at the Kokuritsu Gekijo in the Japanese version of Alexander Ostrovski's *The Talent and the Patron*. She returned to Japanese film in 1976, appearing in Yamada Yoji's *Otoko wa Tsurai Yo: Torajiro Yuyake Koyake*, in which she played an elderly ikebana teacher. At the very end of the picture — while remaining in character — she turns to the film audience and bows, commenting that although she had lived a life of unusual activities, she had "few regrets." Today, she continues to domicile in Moscow.

Personalities like Okada Yoshiko have created a minor motif in the history of Japanese women, especially in the period since the Meiji reformation. The image of pre-War Japanese womanhood as hemmed in by sexual and social mores and as the victim of double standards and gross exploitations, is essentially true. Social and film critic Sato Tadao has pointed out, however, that the exaggerated emphasis placed on chastity in women from Meiji times was actually an import from Victorian England, rather than a continuation of domestic traditions from the Edo Period. Puritanism, he maintains, is far more Christian than traditionally Japanese. By the turn of the century, however, it had

become such a part of the cultural and social fabric of the nation, that its foreign origins were eclipsed in the popular mind. *Shimpa* — the new dramatic form which seized the public imagination in just this period and celebrated the tragedies and noble sufferings of selfless womankind — gave paradoxical credence to the belief that such was the very essence of Things Japanese.

Yet, out of this same environment, came a different breed of woman. Some, like Okada Yoshiko, seemed to be completely oblivious to the role their society expected them to play. Nor were they conscious of any particular “revolutionary mission.” Rather, they privately invented their own worlds of liberation. The instinct which drove women like Yoshiko toward perfection in Art, gave them the necessary ruthlessness to gouge out of the masculine walls surrounding them a place of their own.

The rest of society perceived and treated them as mutants. It was of course a means of isolating the significance of their “folly.” But, on the other hand, it was a recognition, *de facto*, of their success. They were thus given leeway to act according to their own natures. And, in the end, the riddle of their existence became the object of interpretations far more sympathetic than condemnatory. The two cinematic treatments of the actress Matsui Sumako, done by Kinugasa and Mizoguchi in 1946, are prime examples of such reflective sympathy. Yoshida Yoshishige's 1970 portrayal of Ito Noe (the lover of anarchist Osugi Sakae), in *Eros Plus Massacre*, was another movement in the same direction. Morizaki's recent *Jidaiya's Wife*, and others of its kind, travel even further, making the liberated Japanese woman into an ideal — one which could be successfully emulated by very few in the audience.

“Sympathetic” or not, almost all these interpretations were made by men. It would seem that Yoshiko's early assessment of the potential failings of the female director has become enshrined as part of the “common sense” of the modern Japanese film industry. Okada Yoshiko remains one of the very few Japanese women to use the stage or screen to “redeem” her own kind. In the U.S.S.R., however, her production of *The Life of a Woman*, directed as her graduation thesis for the National Academy of Drama, has since become part of the standard repertoire of the Mayakovsky Theatre in Moscow. We can be sure that what she sought to articulate there was not “sympathy,” but vindication.

FOOTNOTES

- 1.) Kudo Masaharu, *Owari Naki Fuyu no Tabi* (Tokyo: Futaba-sha, 1972), p. 67
- 2.) Ibid. p. 89
- 3.) Yamamoto Kajiro, *Katsudoya Suiri* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1971), pp. 49—50
- 4.) *Nihon Eiga Haiyu Zenshu: Joyu Hen* (Sato, Shiba) (Tokyo: Kinema Jumbo Sha, 1980), p. 155

- 5.) Kishi Matsuo, "Okada Yoshiko," *Eiga Hyoron* (November, 1952), p. 55
- 6.) Arishiro Saburo, *Hono no Onna 70 Nen* (Tokyo: Hirakawa Shuppan, 1973), p. 70
- 7.) Kishi, *op. cit.* p. 49
- 8.) *Ibid.* p. 58
- 9.) Okada Yoshiko, *Kui Naki Inochi O* (Tokyo: Koseido, 1963), p. 85
- 10.) *Nihon Eiga Haiyu Zenshu, op. cit.* 157
- 11.) *Ibid.*
- 12.) Ibaragi Ken, *Nihon Shingeki Sho-shi* (Tokyo: Miriasha, 1961), p. 75
- 13.) quoted in *Nihon Eiga Haiyu Zenshu, op. cit.* p. 58
- 14.) Kishi, *op. cit.* p. 58