

Tokyo Story [U]

1953

Japan

135 mins

UK released **Re-release (4k restoration) 1 Sep 23**

Director **Yasujirô Ozu**

Screenplay **Kôgo Noda; Yasujirô Ozu**

Cinematography **Yûharu Atsuta**

Music **Takanobu Saitô**

Cast **Chishû Ryû (Sukichi); Chieko Higashiyama (Tomi);
Setsuko Hara (Noriko)**

The exquisite sadness of Yasujiro Ozu's 1953 film, now re-released for its 70th anniversary, does not get any more bearable or less overwhelming with time. With each repeated viewing, the film of tears obscuring my own view of its star Setsuko Hara appears earlier and earlier, making her heartbreakingly decent, courageous smile shimmer and wobble. Ozu's distinctive and stylised idiom, with low shooting angles and direct sightlines into camera, creates something mesmerically formal to match the drama's emotional restraint, which is more devastating when the dam is breached. When Hara's smile finally drops, it is like a gunshot.

Chieko Higashiyama and Ozu's repertory stalwart Chishu Ryu play the elderly Tomi and Shukichi, who live in the quiet town of Onomichi; they are gentle country mice, almost childlike in the calm, smiling way they address each other. This heartbreakingly modest couple have taken the decision in the evening of their lives to make the arduous and bewildering journey to Tokyo in the sweltering summer to visit their grownup children.

As the drama continues, poor Tomi is to suffer dizzy spells, about which she and her husband tell no one, and Ozu and his longtime collaborating screenwriter Kogo Noda leave it up to us to decide what is behind them: did she always intended this visit to be a poignant, unacknowledged goodbye, or did the stress of the journey suddenly damage her fragile health.

The awful truth is that their grownup children are heartless, selfish and have no time for them. The only person who loves and cares about Shukichi and Tomi is their widowed daughter-in-law Noriko, unforgettably played by Hara, who was married to their son Shoji, still missing in action after the second world war. It is Noriko who takes her parents-in-law on a sightseeing trip in Tokyo (although she too is busy and has to ask for time off work); and it is Noriko who has Tomi to stay in her tiny flat (while Shukichi stays with their older daughter Shige).

This is a movie which is partly about the dismal and banal fear of disappointment at the end of one's life: in a famous scene, their younger daughter Kyoko (Kyoko Kagawa) asks Noriko: "Isn't life disappointing?" and she sadly agrees. While boozing with some old friends, Shukichi ponders the terrible unmentionable feeling of disappointment with one's children. And yet disappointment is not the key theme in Tokyo Story; there is nothing disappointing about Noriko's heroic and magnificent integrity in asserting her love for Tomi and Shukichi.

Shukichi becomes the centre of the film's mysterious invocation of death and mortality. His bland, emollient smile never seems to leave him, even when talking about the saddest and most painful things of all; Tomi dies, but he never cries. How does he feel about his wife's death? How did he feel about her when she was alive? Perhaps he is close enough to death to have already said goodbye to life and to his own identity. What a stunning work of art this is.

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 31 August 2023 (abridged)

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