TSUMA YO BARA NO YÔ NI (WIFE! BE LIKE A ROSE!) is a prospective LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stouppe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier. Here's Kino Ken's review of that 1935 Japanese film.

Japan 1935 black-and-white 84 minutes subtitled live action feature dramedy Toho Co. Ltd. / PCL Productions

16 of a possible 20 points ** of a possible *******

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer
Points:

2 Direction: Mikio Naruse*
2 Editing: Hôichi Iwashita
1 Cinematography: Hiroshi Suzuki
1 Lighting
2 Screenplay: Mikio Naruse* from the play titled in English TWO WIVES by Minoru Nakano
1 Music: Noboru Itô
2 Art Direction: Kazuo Kubo
2 Sound: Koichi Sugii
2 Acting
1 Creativity
16 total points

Cast: Sachiko Chiba* (Kimiko Yamamoto), Yuriko Hanabusa* (Oyuki, Shunsaku's second wife), Toshiko Itô* (Etsuko, Kimiko's mother), Setsuko Horikoshi* (Shizuko, Oyuki's daughter), Chikako Hosokawa (Shingo's wife), Sadao Maruyama* (Shunsaku, Kimiko's father), Heihachirô Ôkawa* (Seiji, Kimiko's boyfriend), Kaoru Itô (j) (Kenichi, Oyuki's son), Kamatari Fujiwara* (Shingo, Etsuko's brother), others

Sadly under-represented on North American dvd, the films of Mikio Naruse rank among Japanese cinema's finest dramatic productions. Among his best is TSUMA YO BARA NO YO NI (WIFE, BE LIKE A ROSE).

It was one of five features the director churned out in 1935. Earlier that year, he had made the transition to sound film with OTOME-GOKORO SANNIN SHIMAI (THREE SISTERS WITH MAIDEN HEARTS). Obviously still relishing the novelty of sound recording, he plunged into creating a star vehicle for the actress who two years later became his wife, Sachiko Chiba. They were divorced in 1940.

The plot concerned a young career woman – played charmingly with notable wordly gentleman posing by Chiba – who gradually discovered her father was more contented with a demonstrative second wife than trapped in the formal rigidity of his first spouse's domestic intangibility. Kimiko's attentive boyfriend, Seiji, has declared his willingness to advance their courtship to engagement status. However, his dad must meet Kimiko's absentee father Shunsaku before that can be accomplished. Getting runaway gold prospector Shunsaku back to original mate Etsuko in Tokyo wasn't going to be a cinch.

Indeed, Kimiko's dad managed to come into the city unannounced, being spotted by both daughter and sister-in-law while attending to credit business. Thinking misguidedly he would surely pay them a visit later that evening, Kimiko prepared a special meal of his favorites at home. Shunsaku never showed himself there, disappointing brother Shingo, famished Seiji, eldest daughter, and tardily informed Etsuko.

Their only souvenir from him was yet another envelope with a money order inside, one of a long series which had helped pay Kimiko's college tuition and clothing purchases.

A frustrated and disappointed young miss resolved to take the initiative herself, using address information appearing on the front of an otherwise unenlightening communication. Off to the mountains she traveled, daydreaming about how to engineer a storybook parental reunion. After reaching the district where papa was working, she experienced trouble locating his village, finally asking a schoolboy for directions to the Yamamoto family's house.

Which engendered suspicion in the hearer. For he himself was a Yamamoto. Who was this inquisitive stranger from the metropolis? She wore eye-catching fashionable Western dress, quite glaringly inappropriate to her surroundings. How was she connected to his father?

A question Kimiko evaded answering. As the pair proceeded to walk to their destination, each probing verbal thrust from one was parried by the other. Though the boy was clearly her own half-brother, Kimiko had no intention of establishing amicable relations with him. After all, Kenichi's mother was a former geisha, someone who had robbed the visitor of a happy home and paternal presence. Such utter selfishness. How malicious of her.

Though Shunsaku welcomed his eldest child lovingly, he chafed at a proposal to accompany her back to Etsuko in Tokyo. Why should he give up the pleasure of two children, Kenichi and his older sister Shizuko, in order to mollify a third?

Oyuki insisted he perform his proper fatherly duty. She allied herself with Kimiko, the two of them badgering reluctant shirker to accept, for once, the responsibilities of heading a family. So long as the man found his way back to the country trio whose social position depended upon his staying with them, Oyuki was willing to temporarily grant a release. Kimiko, as clincher, pledged to return her companion after a few days.

But once back on a train with papa, her inclinations reversed to their accustomed self-centeredness. She didn't want to let go of what she had caught. Why should Shizuko, that sweetly shy tailor who had accepted a life of unrelenting poverty, get to see more of Shunsaku than herself? It rankled her the younger woman had already sacrificed her chance at a college education so she herself could obtain schooling and a white collar job. There was no way she could compensate a half-sister for that, except by delivering their common

parent back to her. Something Kimiko stubbornly resisted doing. She justified her actions by telling herself they were warranted by Mother's need for a permanent husband.

Except Etsuko preferred creating poetry about a languishing, victimized spouse. She was a refined creature of the city.

Shinzaku certainly was a different sort of person. He found cinema a stifling bore and showed no interest in Mrs. Yamamoto's sublime poems. Even Shingo's offer to buy his brother a stable job in Tokyo couldn't draw two such opposites back into harmony.

Would Kimiko's dream of a happy urban home life ever materialize?

Naruse opened his film with bustling street shots in Tokyo, catching sights and sounds of anonymous individuals in dialogue-free mini-vignettes where characters briefly appeared in profile on their hurried way to evening residences. The city was a kind of web in which those trapped inside pursued, by necessity or habit, a punctual routine allowing few opportunities for either leisure or pleasure.

On the contrary, Naruse's later mountain village of Hirao where Oyuki and her children lived, exuded a sensual casualness encouraging direct expression and joyful satisfaction in present circumstances.

The people of his city constantly worried about tomorrow, the unpredictability of what it would bring eliminating tranquil basking in the reality of the present. Would dinner be ready promptly? Could they afford a new kimono? What was playing in the cinema that evening? When they studied something, it wasn't for the sake of acquiring or expanding knowledge, but rather as a means to a bigger paycheck. A trip to a movie house was mainly just to fill otherwise idle hours, or to reconnect with a past that otherwise was merely lifeless legends in books students were compelled to read by government authority.

In that kind of environment people were more accustomed, Naruse felt, to live isolated lives, seeking fulfillment in obtaining things, becoming increasingly alienated from meaningful social relations with others. Kimiko and Seiji bucked that trend, finding witty companionship preferable to lonely lamentation and

self-pity. Copying Etsuko's miserable existence wasn't what they planned to do with their lives.

Could they ultimately achieve a blissful marriage in Tokyo?

Naruse, single at the time this film was made, might still have been as optimistic and naïve as his cheerful young couple. His films and marriage would become bleaker over time, possibly ruined by civic or vocational stress. But intervening war might also have led him to grow more pessimistic.

WIFE! BE LIKE A ROSE! offered an abundance of opportunities for cast members to shine. Pregnant silences often closely followed dialogue passages, as Naruse prolonged scenes by tracking from room to room, breaking up walks with hesitations and full stops, interjecting landscapes observed from train and cityscapes viewed from cab or bus. When conversations did occur, they frequently took the form of teasings, their real import often quite the opposite of what was spoken aloud. Thus the director compelled auditors to pay close attention to soundtrack and screen simultaneously, for what was happening on one could be contradicted immediately by elements of the other. Shying away from complexity and layering was not on Naruse's agenda.

Especially remarkable in this film were the dramatizations of his actresses. Sachiko Chiba wavered back and forth from decisiveness to uncertainty, sometimes mirroring feminine delicacy and susceptibility, at other junctures behaving in a brash, aggressively masculine manner. Her character mixed freeloading with manipulation, teasing, insecurity, and opinionated assertiveness. All these modes she employed with skill and believability.

Matching her in expressive depth were three other female performers. Yuriko Hanabusa's Oyuki reflected brilliantly qualities of self-effacement and generous altruism mingled with spousal accommodation and unflinching insistence on doing what she felt to be morally correct, regardless of consequences to herself and her children. As Shizuko, Setsuko Horikoshi nobly realized conflicting claims of sisterhood and breadwinner, maidenly reserve and traditional obedience hiding suppressed jealousy and a conviction of familial injustice demanding she be deprived of education and dowry for the benefit of Kimiko. A rival the young lady had never even met until the Tokyo relative descended upon her unannounced. Much to her trepidation.

In the role of Etsuko, Toshiko Itô brought stoicism to inattentive wife and negligent mother, far more intent on winning public acclaim as a published poetess than concerned about failings as housekeeper, cook, mate, or confidante. Her passions, limited to raptures about families momentarily enacting socially approved best practices in child-rearing and her own felicities of writing, didn't extend to those who should have been nearest and dearest. Itô even moved like a mechanical incarnation of working inspiration, impervious to interruptions and interferences from friends and relatives, dedicated solely to abstractions at the expense of family and her own humanity. It was easy for viewers to understand from her stiffness and disengagement why Kimiko fantasized so much about recapturing her father.

Nor did Naruse fail to capitalize on the talents of his male cast.

Kamitari Fujiwara's dilettante Shingo, obsessed with classic song though woefully untalented, alternated spirited comic relief with ineffectual meddling as an ill-advised senior counselor and stubborn pragmatist, hidebound by convention, completely insensitive to feelings of those around him, including pet birds tormented by his vocal cacophonies.

Mr. Walking Stomach, perpetually hungry Heihachirô Ôkawa's Seiji otherwise exuded complacency, devotion to free meals, and peevishness about his prospective bride's habitual, unapologetic infringements on his wallet. Whether attempting construction of tolerably literate haiku or blocking pursuit of departing prospector, Ôkawa proved equally winning. He adroitly combined physical comedy and verbal dueling, delivering lines with optimal pauses and inflections.

The third major male onscreen, Sadao Maruyama's ambitionless Shunsaku was the epitome of quiet reserve, always putty for other people's molding, no one's idea of a self-starter. Shunsaku's intuitive commitment to self-preservation, masking incompetency under facile tolerance, threatened to leave his independently functioning families unanchored, a proposition not fazing him in the least. Maruyama's remote look of idealistic abstraction fittingly seconded the weary slowness of his motions. Shunsaku needed care, a weakness endearing him to women. This dependency and unwillingness to command

anyone to do anything Maruyama, with attenuated listlessness bordering on apathy, sculpted into a memorable delineation of relaxed self-acceptance.

Cinematography here was subordinated to character development, marginalized to simple background settings for plot purposes. Camera movement followed actors about and prefaced new scenes, concerning itself with character revelation. Not action.

If lighting had ever been of superior quality, that luster diminished over time. Presumably adequate illumination was all Naruse and audiences wished, just enough for discrimination of faces and gestures.

Edits flowed naturally from conclusions of speeches or transitions of time. Nothing attention-grabbing was permitted.

Adapting another writer's play to the screen, Naruse found plenty of ammunition for barbed commentary on Japanese marriage standards. Here he probed beneath the surface of respectability, inspecting hidden cracks which caused Shunsaku's first nuptials to run aground. Whereas his second union remained intact and mutually satisfying.

Those are contrasted with the impending jointure of Kimiko and Seiji, two amiable snipers who might well have originated in a screwball American comedy.

In each instance, the adaptor splendidly mined words for what they left unsaid as well as for their clear connotations. Plenty of cultural references were inserted, too, ranging from an IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT parody to commentary on Japanese poetry. The results were literate, incisive, and provocative. Too much so for some 1930s American critics appalled at what resembled a direct assault on monogamy.

The director showcased newly adopted sound recording ranging from bird calls to traffic clamor, at times privileging diegetic noise, as if to prove to audiences the superiority of synchronized sound. Yet he also included more than a couple telling moments of speechlessness, recalling the impressive suggestiveness of silent cinema drama. Usually what was heard related directly to unfolding the story plot or accentuating a humorous scene.

Props played key roles, too. Such as the smoking device Kimiko picks up and tries out after it has been left behind by her aunt. Kenichi's fingerings of his

school cap prefigured Brando's work with Eva Marie Saint's school glove in ON THE WATERFRONT, though much less commented upon. Rows of donated plants in the apartment shared by Kimiko and Etsuko, individually arrived from grateful students of the latter, doubled as conversation pieces, their presences indicating the lack of real income from Etsuko's job.

While studio sets predominated, location work added street scenes, streams, and mountain ranges to the film. Storefronts in early sequences must have been authentic, too.

A pop song heard intermittently throughout the production served as a theme sung with varying intensity and purpose. On the basis of translated subtitles, it must have been a rhapsody to spring. If so, it was a double-dealing one, for what viewers saw was the autumn or winter of a marital relationship, a hopelessly irreparable breach the best filial intentions of Kimiko could not plug.

Focused on human problems of miscommunication and incompatibility, Naruse's early masterpiece deserved praise and attention in 1935 and has since continued to garner them on the basis of topical relevance.

This film is certainly one of the strongest candidates for future Criterion dvd release. Those fortunate enough to track it down on the Internet or at a film festival will be amply rewarded for their efforts.

Even fellow director Yasujiro Ozu showed less insight into family dynamics than prewar Naruse.

WIFE! BE LIKE A ROSE! makes a sterling introduction to Japanese cinema. It would form an intriguing double-bill with a later Naruse film about familial connections, OKAASAN (MOTHER) from 1952, likewise still absent from titles released on North American dvd.