

Below is Kino Ken's review of Akira Kurosawa's feature drama *Shizuka naru kettô* (*The Quiet Duel*).

7 of a possible 20 points = substandard film

Japan 1949 black-and-white 95 minutes subtitled live action feature drama
Producers: Hisao Ichikawa and Sôjirô Motoki Daiei Studios /
Film Art Association Viewed online at YouTube.

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



Points:

- 1 Direction: Akira Kurosawa
- 0 Editing: Masanori Tsujii
- 1 Cinematography: Sôichi Aisaka
Still Photography: Isamu Shima
- 0 Lighting: Tsunekichi Shibata
- 0 Screenplay: Kazuo Kikuta, Akira Kurosawa, and Senkichi Taniguchi
- 0 Music: Akira Ifukube
- 1 Art Direction: Kôichi Imai
- 2 Sound: Mitsuo Hasegawa*
- 1 Acting
- 1 Creativity
- 7 total points

Cast: Toshirô Mifune (Dr. Kyoji Fujisaki), Takashi Shimura (Dr. Konosuke Fujisaki,

Kyoji's father), Miki Sanjō (Misao Matsumoto), Kenjirō Uemura (Susumu Nakada, syphilis carrier), Chieko Nakakita (Takiko Nakada, Susumu's wife), Noriko Sengoku (apprentice nurse Rui Minegishi), Jyonosuke Miyazaki (Corporal Horiguchi), Isamu Yamaguchi (Patrolman Nosaka), Shigeru Matsumoto (j) (boy with appendicitis), Hiroko Machida (Nurse Imai), Kan Takami (laborer), Kisao Tobita (j) (boy with typhoid), Shigeyuki Miyajima (officer), Tadashi Date (father of boy with appendicitis), Etsuko Sudo (mother of boy with appendicitis), Seiji Izumi (policeman), Masateru Sasaki (old soldier), Ken'ichi Miyajima (dealer), Yosuke Kudo (j) (boy), Yakuko Ikegami (gaudy woman), Wakayo Matsumura (student nurse), Hatsuko Wakahara (Mii-chan)

One of master Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's early and less credible film dramas, *Shizuka naru kettō* (*The Quiet Duel*) suffers from overextended scenes that wear out their welcome, excessively melodramatic acting, and a serious miscalculation in casting. A product of Daiei studio, it co-starred Toshiro Mifune, Takashi Shimura, Miki Sanjō, and Kenjirō Uemura.

Unfortunately, this uninspired tale of long-suffering physician Dr. Kyoji Fujisaki's dedication to duty and self-imposed martyrdom could have come straight from a Hollywood teleplay conference. Three different writers combined to disappointingly dismal effect, creating a tediously repetitive story, one abounding in scenes most memorable for highlighting actor Mifune's back. Which was by no means his most formidable acting asset.

An outstanding introduction with army surgeon Fujisaki and his equally exhausted partner attempting to deal with continual new arrivals requiring emergency operations show Kurosawa at his best. The influences of Frank Capra's rain-soaked settings (see 1930's *Rain or Shine*, for example) and Italian street scene grubbiness reminiscent of Frank Borzage silents are strongly evident as the frustrated pair of medics try to maintain acceptable operating conditions despite leaky, bothersome "ceiling" holes and flickering lights. Here the actors are mobile inside a set crammed with appropriately placed furnishings. Dialogue is minimal. Had Kurosawa continued on in the same manner, he might have crafted a masterpiece. Alas, he instead slid into static scenes of characters talking at, rather than to, each other.

Relying on subplots involving the wife of syphilis carrier Susumu Nakada and pregnant apprentice nurse Rui Minegishi only further retards what should be a developing story plot pitting Dr. Kyoji's counselings and prudence against Nakada's reckless negligence and resistance to treatment. Too often Mifune's noble agony is reported to viewers rather than shown, with his face frequently unseen by the camera lens.

Contracting syphilis from an accidental jab from a used scalpel after stitching of soldier Nakada had been completed, Dr. Kyoji belatedly finds himself cursed with a treatable, long-term infection problem requiring years to totally cure. That meant cancelling marriage plans, as well as deliberately masking his illness from patients and trusting obstetrician father. So the junior Fujisaki labors on in his chosen profession, sneaking injections of Salvarsan when nobody's around. Until nosy Minegishi catches him in the act one day. Much to his chagrin.

Of course, neither premarital woes nor secret Salvarsan doses advance dramatic action one bit. Only when Kyoji reencounters Nakada, who has married and become a heavy drinker, does the main motor of this movie again propel it forward. Tension between the two constitutes the true conflict at *The Quiet Duel's* core.

Director Kurosawa only seemed to realize that after stumbling through a swamp of lackluster conversations between stoic Kyoji and vexed fiancée Misao Matsumoto. The latter winds up marrying someone else. But not before inflicting herself over and over again on captive screeners, whining about how she just can't understand Kyoji's behavior and coldness. Nonetheless, she refuses to release herself from him until offered some reasonable explanation. That is something he steadfastly and predictably refuses to do.

Chaining Mifune to this kind of silent suffering role is like caging a lion and yet hoping to see it turn savagely explosive one final bravura time. When the lion ultimately howls its pain, the result's a classic example of too much, too late. Kyoji ultimately unburdens himself to papa and Minegishi rather than to Misao. Just who is really the significant other in his life?

The two confessions simply provide more superfluous talk substituting for meaningful dramatic action.

Before the director completes this aggravatingly meandering tale, there's a stillborn baby, one overdue divorce, an almost-lethal battle in the Fujisaki clinic,

and a conclusion replaying that of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Though Minegishi hardly seems as stolidly resigned to fate as Estella.

One particularly excruciating feature of the motion picture is its teaming a childish shrill, happy-go-lucky music box melody with Kyoji's delayed admission of infection when trying to vindicate his honor after being accused by dad Konosuke of irresponsible sexual conduct. This mismatch only trivializes the succeeding restoration of father and son harmony.

Another shipwreck in the voyage towards a climax is Mifune's miscasting as an Ozu-like victim of indifferent Destiny. Mifune, used positively, always challenged fate rather than passively accepting it. On the contrary, the Taoist who received whatever life brought without murmuring is ideally played by Shimura, as exemplified by his Kanji Watanabe character in *Ikiru!* Mifune would have been much better assigned the role of violent troublemaker Nakada.

On the plus side, Mitsuo Hasegawa handled sound chores with finesse, somewhat compensating for the film's deficiencies in the areas of lighting and editing.

Cinematography and art direction are adequate, though far from remarkable.

Due to its themes, violence, and sometimes extremely vulgar language, *The Quiet Duel* is only suited to adult viewers. Even for them, it's rather a trial, perhaps best regarded as a side trip into commercial filmmaking.

Which Kurosawa's next feature, *Stray Dog*, most certainly was not.