

JANUS FILMS

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The Films of Kinuyo Tanaka

SIX FILMS FROM AN OVERLOOKED AUTEUR

A pioneering woman in a studio system that actively discouraged female directors, Kinuyo Tanaka made six groundbreaking features over the course of a decade, dismissing the passivity assigned to most female protagonists of the era and creating a small, radical oeuvre of progressive heroines. Though she has long been renowned as an iconic actor, having starred in films by directors such as Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi, and Mikio Naruse, Tanaka's own work as a filmmaker has been conspicuously absent from most studies of Japanese cinema. All six films by Tanaka—none of which have ever been distributed in North America, much less screened outside of Japan—have been restored in 4K for this retrospective, the first to present her directorial work in its entirety.

This series is part of Janus Films' ongoing effort to restore and release overlooked and undistributed filmographies from women filmmakers across the globe.



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BIOGRAPHY

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EARLY LIFE

Kinuyo Tanaka was born the youngest of nine siblings in Shimonoseki, Japan, on November 29, 1909. After the death of her father in 1911 and the subsequent departure of her two older brothers, the Tanaka family was left in poverty.

Tanaka was a fiercely determined and independent child: at the age of nine, she quit school after a scolding from her teacher. Later she joined the Biwa Girls' Operetta Troupe, becoming a child star by the age of twelve. She supported the entire family with her income and would continue to do so for the remainder of her life.

ACTING CAREER

After the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 destroyed Tokyo's production studios, the Japanese film industry relocated to Kyoto, close to the Tanaka family home. One of Tanaka's brothers worked for the Shochiku production company and eventually introduced her to his employers. At the age of fourteen, she was cast in her first film.

During the 1920s and '30s, Tanaka appeared in at least ten of the studio's productions each year, and usually as the female lead. She was already a *kanbu* (the lead actress in smaller productions) by the age of nineteen and reached *daikanbu*, the highest position obtainable by an actress, when she was twenty-five.

Tanaka worked with the greatest filmmakers of her time, including Heinosuke Gosho, who cast her in the first successful Japanese sound film (*The Neighbor's Wife and Mine*, 1931), and Yasujiro Ozu, who often presented her as the Japanese version of a Hollywood femme fatale.

In 1940, Tanaka met the filmmaker for whom she would become both collaborator and muse: Kenji Mizoguchi. Together they created some of Japanese cinema's most important works, including *The Love of Sumako the Actress* (1947), *Women of the Night* (1948), *Miss Oyu* (1951), *The Life of Oharu* (1952), *Ugetsu* (1953), and *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954). During the fifties, Japanese cinema's most prosperous and glorious era, Tanaka starred in a dizzying succession of classics directed by Ozu, Gosho, Mikio Naruse, and Keisuke Kinoshita.

DIRECTORIAL CAREER

At the age of forty-two, and after starring in more than two hundred films, Tanaka chose to work behind the camera as a director. This decision constituted a milestone in the history of women in Japanese cinema.

Prior to Tanaka, only one woman had directed a Japanese feature film: Tazuko Sakane, a frequent collaborator of Mizoguchi's, as an assistant director and editor. During the shooting of *New*



Clothing (1936; lost), Sakane suffered bullying from her all-male crew, who openly ignored her directions. The film was a commercial failure, and Sakane eventually moved to Manchuria to shoot documentaries. Upon her return to Japan after World War II, she was unable to find work as a director.

For almost two decades after *New Clothing*, no woman dared to compete for a directorial position in the Japanese film industry. When Tanaka announced that she would do so, her decision was received with circumspection. In 1952, Japan's studios produced 278 feature films, all directed by men. Moreover, Tanaka had reached her career's zenith: she was starring in several films a year, almost all of them well-received, and she had achieved the status of her country's most celebrated actress. Why would she take such an unnecessary professional risk? critics asked.

Tanaka wished to prove herself, however, and worked with Naruse as an assistant director on *Older Brother, Younger Sister* (1953) in order to learn the filmmaker's craft. Meanwhile, up-and-coming production company Shintoho had learned of Tanaka's plans. In order to cement its reputation as a daring modern studio, Shintoho decided to hire a woman to direct a feature. With the blessing of Shintoho's president, Tanaka chose for her first project a popular novel by a famous writer: *Love Letter*, by Fumio Niwa. Screenwriter and director Kinoshita was picked to adapt the work for the big screen.

In the fall of 1953, Tanaka began shooting *Love Letter*. The film's production was heavily publicized and became a media sensation. Tanaka had decided to shoot outdoors in the busy streets of Tokyo's Shibuya district. The sight of a star actress—one whose screen persona typically embodied a humiliated, wounded, and suffering femininity—wearing male attire and directing a team of more than sixty people was unheard-of.

On the last day of production, Tanaka rushed off to the set of Mizoguchi's *Sansho the Bailiff*, in which she was set to play a lead role. Tanaka waved to the crew and disappeared into the night—she had just become Japan's first postwar female director.

SIX FILMS

The half dozen films that Tanaka made as a director possess significant sociopolitical themes as told from, and informed by, a female perspective. In these films, women avoid becoming objects of the male gaze even though they desire men, and they refuse to conform to restrictive social roles (e.g., the “perfect wife”) as they seek independence and individual agency. While they may wish to realize widely held dreams—romantic intimacy, professional success—they continually reject a reliance on men in order to do so.

With insight and compassion, Tanaka critiques the social conditions and forces that shape her heroines' struggles: prostitution and social shaming (*Love Letter*, 1953), the reduction of a woman to passive romantic partner (*The Moon Has Risen*, 1955), taboos surrounding mortality and the female body (*Forever a Woman*, 1955), colonial politics (*The Wandering Princess*, 1960),

the rehabilitation of “fallen women” (*Girls of the Night*, 1961), and religious persecution and forbidden love (*Love Under the Crucifix*, 1962).

LATER CAREER

At the beginning of the sixties, the Japanese studios began a decline, and Tanaka's career followed the same trajectory. Though she gave one of her best performances in 1958's *The Ballad of Narayama* (for which she received the Kinema Junpo Award for Best Actress), she increasingly turned to television for work and made only a few appearances on the big screen in supporting roles (as in Akira Kurosawa's 1965 *Red Beard*).

In 1974, Tanaka turned in a stunning performance in Kei Kumai's *Sandakan No. 8*, for which she earned a Silver Bear for Best Actress at the 1975 Berlin Film Festival, her first major international acting award. She died two years later of a brain tumor, on March 21, 1977.

DIRECTOR FILMOGRAPHY

1953	<i>Love Letter</i> (<i>Koibumi</i>)
1955	<i>The Moon Has Risen</i> (<i>Tsuki wa noborinu</i>)
1955	<i>Forever a Woman</i> (<i>Chibusa yo eien nare</i>)
1960	<i>The Wandering Princess</i> (<i>Ruten no oh</i>)
1961	<i>Girls of the Night</i> (<i>Onna bakari no yoru</i>)
1962	<i>Love Under the Crucifix</i> (<i>Ogin-sama</i>)



FILM SYNOPSES

Love Letter

1953 • 97 minutes • Black & White • 1.37:1 aspect ratio

Released a year after the American occupation of Japan ended, Kinuyo Tanaka's directorial debut explores the professional and personal conflicts of Reikichi (Masayuki Mori), a repatriated veteran who searches for his lost love (Yoshiko Kuga) while translating romantic letters from Japanese women to American GIs. As adapted from a novel by Fumio Niwa, *Love Letter* depicts with incisive complexity the fraught adaptation of Japanese soldiers to a changed society as well as the moral condemnation of Japanese women who became involved with the enemy.

The Moon Has Risen

1955 • 102 minutes • Black & White • 1.37:1 aspect ratio

For her second film, Tanaka directed a script by legendary collaborator and mentor Yasujiro Ozu. Though informed by Ozu's singular take on familial relationships, *The Moon Has Risen* also possesses Tanaka's lively and elegant comedic sensibility in its depiction of a widower (Chishu Ryu) who lives with his three daughters (Hisako Yamane, Yoko Sugi, and Mie Kitahara). As several young men court the women, their father is forced to confront—with amusing bewilderment—Japanese society's rapidly evolving mores.

Forever a Woman

1955 • 106 minutes • Black & White • 1.37:1 aspect ratio

Widely considered Tanaka's first personal film, *Forever a Woman* tells the story of a recent divorcée (Yumeji Tsukioka) who is diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer. In adapting the real-life story of the poet Fumiko Nakajo, Tanaka and screenwriter Sumie Tanaka (a longtime collaborator of Mikio Naruse's, though of no familial relation to Kinuyo) investigate issues of mortality, sexuality, and female independence with a frankness and audacity unprecedented in postwar Japanese cinema.

The Wandering Princess

1960 • 102 minutes • Color • 2.35:1 aspect ratio

Kinuyo Tanaka's first film in both color and CinemaScope is an epic about a woman caught in the torrents of history. Based on the memoirs of Hiro Saga, *The Wandering Princess* tells the story of Ryuko (Machiko Kyo), an aristocrat who, at the outset of World War II, is forced to marry Futetsu (Eiji Funakoshi), the younger brother of the soon-to-be-deposed Chinese emperor. With the story of Ryuko's enmeshment in the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, Tanaka realizes with startling depth her ambition to relate a historical saga from a critical female perspective.



Girls of the Night

1961 • 93 minutes • Black & White • 2.35:1 aspect ratio

With *Girls of the Night*, Tanaka reunited with screenwriter Sumie Tanaka to explore Japan's attempted reformation of former prostitutes. The film follows Kuniko (Hisako Hara), an escort who enters a rehabilitation center after the Prostitution Prevention Law prohibits her line of work. But creating a new life proves treacherous—wherever Kuniko goes, the past seems to catch up with her. In once again taking on challenging subject matter, Kinuyo Tanaka paints an empathetic portrait of a fragile community of untamed outcasts.



Girls of the Night

Love Under the Crucifix

1962 • 102 minutes • Color • 2.35:1 aspect ratio

Tanaka's final work as a director evokes the golden age of Japanese cinema with a large-scale, sixteenth-century-set costume drama. Produced by the independent studio Ninjin Kurabu, *Love Under the Crucifix* centers on the forbidden romance between Ogin (Ineko Arima), daughter of a famous tea master, and Ukon (Tatsuya Nakadai), a married samurai. The shogunate's prohibition of Ukon's Christian faith forces the lovers to fight against the prejudices of an oppressive society while persisting in their mutual devotion.



Love Under the Crucifix

TRIVIA

As an actress, Kinuyo Tanaka appeared in approximately 250 films, in addition to her television appearances.

In 1950, public opinion briefly turned against Tanaka after she traveled to the United States as a cultural goodwill ambassador. When she returned to Japan, she arrived at the airport in Western style, greeting the crowd with a joyful “Hello!”

Tanaka was the muse of Kenji Mizoguchi, with whom she made fifteen films. Three of them—*The Life of Oharu* (1952), *Ugetsu* (1953), and *Sansho the Bailiff* (1954)—won prestigious awards at the Venice Film Festival.

Tanaka's mentors were divided over her decision to launch a directorial career. While old friends and collaborators Mikio Naruse, Keisuke Kinoshita, and Yasujiro Ozu offered their full support, Mizoguchi adamantly opposed the idea. At one point, he allegedly said Tanaka “does not have enough brains to be a film director.”

After the release of Tanaka's first directorial effort, Mizoguchi, at the time the chair of the Directors Guild of Japan, attempted to block an assignment for her to direct a follow-up film. Tanaka would never work with him again.



Tanaka's star status ensured the visibility of her directorial work: major studios (Shintoho, Nikkatsu, Daiei, and Toho) produced five of her six films. Their support allowed her access to high-profile collaborators, including screenwriters Kinoshita, Ozu, and Natto Wada and actors Yoshiko Kuga and Machiko Kyo.