

Taki no Shiraito (The Water Magician) and
Tokyo Koshinkyoku (Tokyo March)



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In Japan, silent film screening theaters had very lively atmospheres. A door man would shout to call in people, and sweets vendors loudly advertised “rice crackers! caramels!” during intermission. Once the screening started, a band played music in front of the screen, and it was often a unique orchestra with both western and Japanese instruments. Also, there was a benshi, motion picture narrator, close to the screen. The narrators not only said the lines for the actors, but also told the story dramatically.

Maestro Kenji Mizoguchi filmed 57 movies during the silent-film era. Out of these movies, only six are preserved. Fortunately, one of those six films is one of Mizoguchi’s masterpieces, *Taki no Shiraito* (The Water Magician), which became a big hit in its time.

This film was produced in 1933 by an independent film production company, Irie Production, established by Takako Irie, the actress who played the main role in this film. During this golden age of Japanese movies, many popular actors established independent film production companies, and actively produced movies. However, Takako Irie was the only woman to establish a production company. Her father was an aristocrat and held the title viscount, and so it was very unusual for her to be an actress when movie actors and actresses were still looked down upon. Takako Irie started her career as a stage actress in 1928 in a play written by Chekhov. More than anything, her graceful beauty propelled her to stardom after she was scouted for a movie role the same year. She was beautiful in a kimono, but her perfect figure (height 162cm, weight 51kg, bust 82cm, waist 64cm, hip 89cm) dressed in western style had no equal among Japanese actresses.

Up-and-coming young directors such as Tomu Uchida, Tomotaka Tasaka, and Minoru Murata, who would later become respected as maestros, competed to use Takako Irie as a main actress in their films. She was already extremely successful as an actress, and she finally established her own production company in 1932. *Taki no Shiraito* (The Water Magician) was produced when she was at the pinnacle of her popularity. It was a tragic melodrama, but Kenji Mizoguchi, the director of the film, succeeded in highlighting the order of the time and captured women’s beauty and pride. Tokihiko Okada, who played opposite to Takako Irie, was one of the best looking and most popular Japanese actors of that time, famous for his performance in contemporary dramas.

Tokyo Koshinkyoku (Tokyo March) was created in 1929. Unfortunately, this film is only partially preserved. Shizue Natsukawa played the role of a pretty and innocent but poor girl in this film. On the other hand, Takako Irie played a role of a bourgeois and posh woman. After this film, in the early talking-film era, Shizue Natsukawa gained popularity as the best actress to play the role of an intelligent and beautiful woman in Japan.