

Kodakara Sodo (Kid Commotion) and
Akeyuku Sora (The Dawning Sky)



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The director Torajiro Saito (1905-1982) produced more than 200 films in the thirty year period between 1926 and 1962, at an average of more than six films per year. In the beginning, when it was still the era of silent films, most of his works were not feature-length but short pieces intended to accompany longer movies from other directors. Despite this, he became wildly popular. Most of his films are in what we would call the slapstick genre. There is a tendency, I think, to look upon slapstick as a low form of entertainment, but one should bear in mind that such well respected greats as Chaplin and Keaton were principally slapstick actors. Furthermore, for those living during the era of silent movies, the slapstick genre was one that was able to carelessly transcend reality through scene after scene of unexpected pantomime. The genre was well loved and highly respected as proof of the birth of a new cinematic originality. If you are searching for a Japanese equivalent to Chaplin or Keaton, it certainly would have to be none other than Shochiku Kamata Studio's "god of comedy," Torajiro Saito. From the development of the talkies on, comedies began to resemble musicals, and there was less opportunity for Saito to command laughs way he used to with his extreme form of slapstick. While he continued to turn out a multitude of films each year, he received considerably less attention after the end of the silent era. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that he was one of the genius talents of early film.

Thus it is truly unfortunate that most of the short comedies in which Saito shows his talent no longer remain. About the only work that does remain entirely intact is this film from the end of the silent era, 1935's *Kodakara Sodo* (Kid Commotion), preserved by Matsuda Film Productions. The film was originally titled *Sanji Museigen* (Birth (Out of) Control), and was intended to satirize the birth control movement of the time through its depiction of the condition of an impoverished family with too many children. Supposedly there were complaints that the title was too harsh and so it was changed to the harmless *Kodakara Sodo* (Kid Commotion). That said, the premise of the film remains as one that earns laughs through its merciless interpretation of the hardships of a poor man who sees the birth of one child after another. Those who watch it will be surprised at the constant barrage of gags. The main character is played by Shigeru Ogura, one of the many Chaplin-esque comedians of the world at the time. He may have started out as just another Chaplin imitator, but before long he developed into an actor with his own style.

The other work included here is *Akeyuku Sora* (The Dawning Sky), a feature-length film from 1929 that is a rare work for Torajiro Saito, in that it is not a slapstick comedy but a touching drama. The scenario for the film was written by Ayame Mizushima, the most prolific female screenwriter of the silent era. It is a movie which presents a very sympathetic depiction of a feminine and tender family love, one in which you can really see the style of a mainstream Shochiku Kamata film. It is extremely pleasing that this film has been fully preserved.