

## MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA:

We are told late in the movie that a geisha is an “artist.”

But throughout, the Rob Marshall sumptuous follow-up to his award winning “Chicago,” the line is blurred between a courtesan (lower end prostitute) and a geisha (a high end and prized prostitute). A courtesan flaunts her trade, while the geisha hides behind the façade of being an artist. Marshall knows how to create mood and tension, but at the expense of accurate detail.

The movie begins with nine-year-old Chiyo played beautifully by a young Suzuka Ohgo, being sold to a geisha house by her father. Her sister is not considered good enough to be a geisha, and is sold by her father as a courtesan. His wife has died and times are tough in 1930s Japan.

The sisters have formed a bond, but one day, as teenagers, they have lost touch with one another. Chiyo’s life unfolds without a family. She is alone. The geisha house becomes her home and family.

Chiyo rubs the resident “queen” geisha Hatsumorno, (played by Gong Li), wrong and a long-standing feud develops between the two. Chiyo becomes indebted to the geisha house for her transgressions and she becomes a slave to the “mother” of the house until the debt is paid.

In the meanwhile, a prominent business man “The Chairman” (played by Ken Watanabe) befriends the young Chiyo. She decides one day that he is her prince.

In many ways, this film is like a Cinderella love story.

Years later, an aging geisha Mameha (played by Michelle Yeoh), comes to rescue Chiyo from her dreary past. She will train the now named Sayuri (played by Ziyi Zhang) the art of being a geisha and win her freedom from the “mother.”

Mameha calls Sayuri’s eyes “water eyes” because of her beautiful tearful eyes. She tells Sayuri, “Water is powerful. It moves the earth, puts out fire and moves steel.” Sayuri’s feud with Hatsumorno continues with vengeance, back-stabbing and betrayal. The life of a geisha is not all that rosy.

But, Sayuri still loves “The Chairman.” The Hollywood melodramatic sequences permeate. And, like “Cinderella,” all is well at the end. Love will conquer all.

Based on a novel by Arthur Golden and adapted for the screen by Robin Swicord, the film very much is a fantasy romance. I would have preferred a film in Japanese with English subtitles to make it seem more realistic.

The cinematography is breathtaking. Early on, the geisha house is filmed in a very claustrophobic way. It symbolizes the taut restraints that a geisha’s life is to be lived by.

As the characters expand from their emotional ties, the film is shot outdoors during the different seasons. Visually, it is beautiful.

What is interesting and at the same controversial about the movie is that casting of the film involves three prominent Chinese actresses in a Japanese film. Gong Li is stunning as the scheming and jealous resident geisha. Usually, her films, including “Raise the Red Lantern” finds her as a good person. Here she is deliciously malevolent.

Michelle Yeoh, who starred in “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” is noble and her character is sublime. Ziyi Zhang as “Cinderella” is forceful. Suzuka Ohgo as the young Chiyo is a revelation. Ken Watanabe, who was so brilliant in the “The Last Samurai,” has little to do here.

The movie is filled with philosophical voice over musings. Near the end, as Sayuri is ready to “accept” her downfall, the narrator quips, “A geisha paints her face to hide her face.”

The film is visually stunning. The music by John Williams adds to the ambiance, but as a whole the film is somewhat hollow. Ultimately, it’s not a bad movie, but it’s too gimmicky, too sappy, too self righteous, and too historically dubious.

137 Minutes

MPAA Rating: PG-13 (for mature subject matter and some sexual content.)

Rating: B-