

## ***I AM WAITING: PORT OF CALL* (Japan, 1957)**

**Director: Koreyoshi Kurahara's**

The year: 1957. The city: Yokohama, not far from the piers. The sound of the tide softly lapping against stones in the darkness, cubes of black ice in a tumbler of foam. Night. Rain.

Hiroshi Shimizu's ever-prowling camera had followed Japanese girls along these harborsides a quarter of a century earlier, watching them walking, watching them talking, years before movies had sound, before Japan had lost the war. As the 1960s began, one of Nagisa Oshima's ideological slumdogs would deflower his date somewhere nearby, in the blistering sunlight, on a flotilla of rough logs waiting to be milled, her tears, his sneers, in crimson Technicolor so lurid as to defile the nation's cinema forevermore. But tonight, the pier is quiet, the harbor peaceful, the screen saturated only with squid-ink blacks and pallid, paper-lantern whites. Steamers and tugs wolf whistle in the distance, then slowly the determined footfalls of a bandy-legged, bucktoothed boy-man begin to slice through the mist and chill. From out of the shadows comes Yujiro Ishihara, the handsome, if still baby-faced, king of the *taiyozoku* (Japanese cinema's "sun tribe" of dissolute postwar youth)—and now, suddenly, the venerable and recently revitalized Nikkatsu studio's radiant new matinee supernova—and with him a mission: he's got a letter to mail.

Not so noir a midnight sortie, perhaps you're thinking; a bit far afield from the Los Angeles basin or South Street Lower Manhattan, locus classicus of Hollywood film noir, that setting: dockside postwar Japan. But wait: no sooner has Ishihara clanked the letter slot shut than a moonlit minx, a fog-dappled mermaid, a siren from the Yokohama mist, appears before him. She is Mie Kitahara—her long, wavy hair haloed in frizz by the rain; her bangs cut as adorably short as her eyes are filled with hopelessness and pain—and she is loitering, forlornly, perhaps suicidally, at the brackish waterside, a "canary who's forgotten how to sing." And before you can stop yourself from envisioning, say, Jimmy Stewart and Kim Novak in *Vertigo*—or, for that matter, Andy Lau and Maggie Cheung in *Days of Being Wild*—Ishihara is beside her, walking with her through black and slickened streets, taking her "home" to his dockside dive, Restaurant Reef, where soon their darkest secrets shall be revealed, and their deepest fears realized. Add those smoldering gazes from beneath silenced songbird Kitahara's bangs to the defensively hunched shoulders of Ishihara's bruised pugilist, and *I Am Waiting*—an atmosphere-steeped mood masterwork from the early heyday of what would soon become Nikkatsu's house brand of *mukokuseki* ("borderless," i.e., internationalized) action flicks—casts a spell as shadow thatched as any Hollywood noir.

One of nine Ishihara potboilers, youth flicks, and period comedies that Nikkatsu would rush into release in 1957 (the year the actor turned twenty-three), *I Am Waiting* was already young Yujiro's fourteenth feature, in a career that had scarcely begun fifteen months before (waiting, it seems, wasn't otherwise in Ishihara's cards). He'd burst on the scene a year earlier, as a standout supporting player in *Season of the Sun*, the first of Nikkatsu's epoch-opening *taiyozoku* films—a genre jazzed into existence by Yujiro's older brother, Shintaro, a budding literary sensation (and future governor of Tokyo) who'd just won the Akutagawa Award for his tales about the cool, crazy kids who (like the brothers Ishihara) spent their summers on the Shonan coast, chasing girls, swilling drinks, and trashing traditional values. Bumped up to top billing for his follow-up, the ever-grinning, ever-volatile Ishihara, essentially playing himself, was paired with serious actress turned *taiyozoku* siren Mie Kitahara in director Ko Nakahira's sun tribe classic *Crazed Fruit*, a film that inflamed the nation's moral guardians and brought impressionable adolescents back into movie theaters in droves. The couple would continue as costars in more than two dozen films over the next four years. By the end of 1957, Ishihara's fifteenth feature—Umetsugu Inoue's *The Guy Who Started a Storm*, in which he played a hotheaded drummer—would be the thirdbiggest box-office smash of the year and Yu-chan, as his legion of fans would continue to know and adore him for the next thirty years, would be the brightest new star in Japan.

*I Am Waiting's* director, on the other hand—a thirty-year-old, Borneo-born neophyte named Koreyoshi Kurahara, who'd managed to befriend Akira Kurosawa and his mentor, Kajiro Yamamoto, while still a student, and who'd begun as an assistant director at Shochiku in 1952—had continued to bide his time as an assistant since moving over to Nikkatsu in 1954, the year that Japan's oldest studio (which had ceased filmmaking in 1942 but kept itself flush during wartime as an exhibition-only outfit specializing in Hollywood releases) at last resumed production. Within a few short years of his feature debut with this film, however, Kurahara would become one of the most profitable and stylistically versatile directors on the Nikkatsu lot—though nothing in *I Am Waiting's* elegantly pent-up compositions, ultranoir emotions, and contusive selfrecriminations would begin to suggest the bebop freneticism of his lust-maddened 1960 freakout *The Warped Ones* (a.k.a. *Season of Heat*), let alone the family-friendly blockbusters about wily foxes and fearless South Pole sled dogs with which he would continue to rule the Japanese box office through the 1980s.

*I Am Waiting's* title, of course, refers to neither director Kurahara's nor his star-crossed matinee idols' careers, but rather to the restless volatility of Ishihara's character, Joji Shimaki, a “former welterweight rookie of the year” who now finds the strength in his own fists repugnant and who

longs to join his brother in Brazil, a half a planet away from Japan. (It was a plan whose moment had come: Kurosawa's *I Live in Fear* had pondered it just two years before.) But first, Joji's waiting for a letter back from his brother, telling him to come, waiting . . . for a year already, until one day all of Joji's letters to Brazil come back marked "Addressee Unknown." Kitahara's Saeko has been waiting too: waiting for the law, or Nikkatsu regular Hideaki Nitani's gang boss (himself a former pugilist), from whose employ she's on the run, to catch up with her for a crime she hasn't actually committed; and waiting, too, for Joji to wake up and recognize those sparks of fire in her eyes every time she turns his way. But once these lovers' fates finally intertwine, Joji's desperation to learn the truth about his brother's disappearance turns a shade of black so ultranoir he begins having other people's flashbacks as well as his own!

No, this isn't the noir you know already: certainly not that archetypal strain of American cine-anomie long since canonized by critics and cultists alike, and not even the Japanese prenoir of the thoroughly modern gangster films Ozu had been making for Shochiku since the early thirties, or the turbulent Toho crime dramas with which Kurosawa edged ever deeper into the modern world, *Drunken Angel* (1948) and *Stray Dog* (1949)—two films that would nevertheless cast some of the longest shadows over Nikkatsu's output a decade later (even if those shadows were still further refracted through the prism of Hollywood and French crime films that flooded Japanese theaters following the war). No, these late-fifties and early sixties cine-hybrids, with their weird weaves of *taiyozoku* teen heartthrobbing and hard-boiled nihilist repartee, were a distinctly fresh breed of urban thriller, a whole new thing for postwar Nikkatsu: *mukokuseki* action—a "borderless" B-movie blend of homegrown melodrama and cosmopolitan mayhem, pop art va-vavoom and pulpy tough-guy *pow!* that would dominate Far Eastern genre cinema for more than a decade to come.

With *I Am Waiting*, the waiting was over: a new generation of Japanese cinema had begun.