FILM

TOKYO SONATA: *A bleak yet unique outlook on family dynamics*

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For a film titled "Tokyo Sonata," Kiyoshi Kurosawa's latest feature has very little to do with music. There's some piano playing on the side, but the notes that ring true with audiences are not of a musical nature.

On the surface, the story is simple: a man loses his job in the struggling economy and lies to his family about it.

But like a sonata, Kurosawa's film has varying degrees of complexity, starting first and foremost with its tone. "Tokyo Sonata" flows very erratically, going from family drama to dark comedy to love story and back again, always with a slightly jarring quality that keeps audiences on the edge of their seats, unable to predict when the credits will roll.

At the heart of "Tokyo Sonata" is a dysfunctional family (even by today's standards) whose relatively banal existence is uprooted with an unexpected event that changes their lives forever.

The film's key characters seem reminiscent of the stereotypical Asian family at its best: there's the douchebag (but still somewhat lovable) dad (Teruyuki Kagawa), the complacent and loving mom (Kyoko Koizumi), and two rebellious kids, one of whom is clearly more grounded than the other (Yu Koyanagi and Inowaki Kai). Japan's version of "The Simpsons?" Perhaps. I'd buy a Kagawa action figure any day.

But Kurosawa, having directed horror hits such as "Pulse" and "Cure," is unable to resist adding dark nuances to each of his characters, fully fleshing them out to be the people we'd know and recognize in our own families—or at least what could be our families in their darkest and most genuine moments. "Tokyo Sonata" boasts a number of stellar performances, but Koizumi's portrayal of a sweet but spineless housewife coming unglued at the seams is painfully honest and a joy to watch on-screen.

Perhaps resulting from a promising director's eagerness to explore genres outside familiar territory, "Tokyo Sonata" shifts from comedy to suspense in a matter of moments, sometimes quite literally, mixing ordinary events with extraordinary ones in a way that's almost too bizarre to be believable. But that's exactly what keeps us convinced; full blown family catastrophes are rarely mundane or predictable.

The dad's formerly quirky antics eventually turn violent; the mom, having lost both her identity and will in the patriarchal marriage, fumbles for stable footing outside the familiar; and each of their two sons embark on personal journeys, only some of which will lead them home. In all three instances, the notion of family becomes a scapegoat for the trauma that befalls each of them, tying them down to routine and rigidity without the promise of something better.

The film, however, does just the opposite: it not only moves, it flees, jumping from scene to scene like a particularly commanding crescendo. Kurosawa packs layer and layer of emotional punch, as well as new plot developments, into one basic storyline, culminating in a final scene that seems oddly out of place in its quiet solemnity.

"Tokyo Sonata" doesn't go out with a bang but rather ends with a moment of silence. The music has finally stopped and we're watching the characters exit the stage, holding our breath as the curtains come to a close. Like the majority of the film, it's neither completely funny, nor completely dark, but still emotionally powerful in its own way.

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Teruyuki Kagawa plays a manipulative and browbeat dad in Kiyoshi Kurosawa's latest hit "Tokyo Sonata."

ARCHITECTURE

SUZHOU MUSEUM: *A meshing of two worlds*

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When confronted by the past histories of our hometowns, do we embrace it or look beyond it?

The mayor of Suzhou--a historic city just west of Shanghai in China, wanted Chinese American architect I. M. Pei to design a museum near the Lion Grove garden once owned by Pei's family. Instead of embracing the opportunity Pei declined repeatedly, citing as his reservation the pressures of creating something permanent in his home town.

Pei, a world renowned architect of works like the Mile High Center in Denver, the John Hancock Tower in Boston, and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, is best known for his elegant design of the Glass Pyramid at the entrance of the Louvre in Paris.

Born in Guangzhou, southern China in 1917, Pei moved with his family to Suzhou, though his father later took up the duties of the director of the Bank of China, and they had to move. Pei went to school in Hong Kong and the University of Pennsylvania, before getting a degree from MIT in 1940. Unable to return to China due to the start of World War II, he stayed to teach at Harvard before joining the architectural firm of Webb and Knapp. After starting his own firm with James Freed and Henry Cobb, Pei became famous for his urban geometric designs at the JFK International Airport in New York and the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

When Pei was approached again in 2001 about work on the Suzhou museum, it had already been over ten years since he built the Bank of China Tower in Hong Kong. His previous foray into designing for a home town that employed his father had not received the unanimous acclaim that he had hoped for. The triangle-tessellated design was meant to resemble bamboo shoots, but the practitioners of feng shui in Hong Kong were shocked at the bank's angular look. Feng shui experts, who believed that a building and its inhabitants' well-being rested on a harmonious relationship with their environment, thought the tower looked too much like a meat knife, and predicted impending doom for the construction. Despite his own skepticism, Pei had forgotten that in Hong Kong, feng shui holds sway.

After much prodding from the Suzhou authorities, Pei saw that the possibility of creating a modern landmark in a rapidly booming mainland China outweighed the threat of any criticism that he would receive. He embarked on the Suzhou project with a greater concern for native sentiment than he had for the Bank of China project. It also took him three years longer to complete.

The geometric style that Pei brings to the Suzhou museum comes from a particularly Western influence. The windows in the museum, for example, embed intricate patterns in its tiles that resemble the structures of the Louvre pyramid. But layered above this functional Western look are Chinese influences. The window tiles are circumscribed by oval or octagonal frames that look like traditional Chinese windows found in a Qing dynasty house. West and East meet at the junction of the tiles and the frame that holds them together.

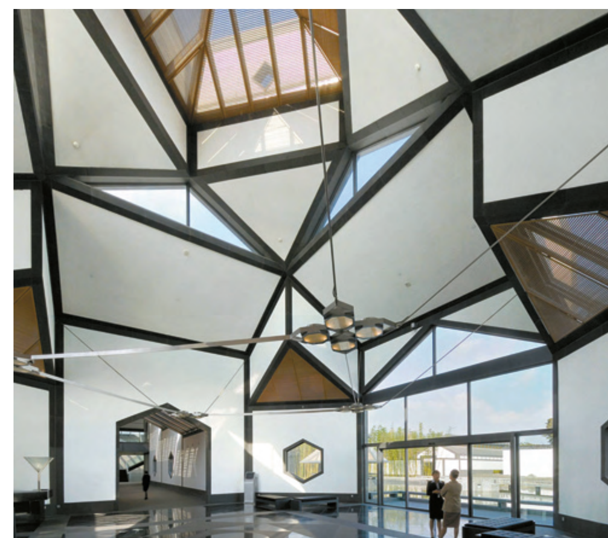
A visitor to the Suzhou museum is struck by the sounds evoking nature even within the hallways. A water fall can be heard in the west wing and only grows louder as one makes her way to the paintings. The building seems to shape the environment, in contrast to Frank Lloyd Wright's Kaufman House--Falling Water, where the environment seems to shape the building. The harmonious meshing of two styles bespeaks the Chinese trait of avoiding contrasting clashes. Compare this to Pei's Bank of China tower, a razor-like entity that sticks out like a bamboo shoot in a corn-field.

The most famous area of the Suzhou museum is a small footbridge that crosses a pond lined with a mountain landscape reminiscent of a classical Chinese water painting. The minimal color selection and the white wall that separates the pond from the trees outside both give the walk across the bridge a sense of Chinese seclusion. On the other hand, the arrangement of rocks on the pond and the symmetry of the footbridge give the landscape proportion and functionality, looks valued by the West. It's as if the modernized bridge stands above a well-illustrated book of watercolors. The structure is Western, but the medium is Eastern.

Pei's trademark angular style that permeated the Bank of China Tower persists in the Suzhou museum. The entrance is a geometric design using triangles, rectangles, and trapezoids of white walls, glass, and brown roofs. The select use of colors keeps the museum from looking like an "explosion in a shingle factory," a phrase used to describe Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase," one of the best examples of abstract art whose angularity made it inaccessible. Pei's Suzhou museum is still abstract, but its expressiveness comes out of a balanced exterior.

The window of varied geometric shapes bound by a Chinese oval frame encapsulates the Suzhou museum, just as I. M. Pei's Western architectural education seems to be bringing him home to his native land.

Pei's museum invites us to conclude that one goes to America to make her name, but comes home to China to experience life.



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The Great Hall at the I. M. Pei designed Suzhou Museum.