

KINO LORBER

Presents



Wife of a Spy

A Film by Kiyoshi Kurosawa
Co-written by Ryusuke Hamaguchi

****Winner: Silver Lion (Best Director) – Venice Film Festival****

Japan | 2021 | 115 mins. | Color | Japanese & English

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LOGLINE

Master filmmaker Kiyoshi Kurosawa (*Pulse*, *Cure*, *Tokyo Sonata*) delivers his “best movie in years” (*Indiewire*) in this riveting, gorgeously crafted, old-school Hitchcockian thriller, which follows a Japanese woman during WWII who begins to suspect her husband’s Western connections may be hiding something more sinister.

SYNOPSIS

Master filmmaker Kiyoshi Kurosawa (*Pulse*, *Cure*, *Tokyo Sonata*) won the Silver Lion (Best Director) at the Venice Film Festival for this riveting, gorgeously crafted, old-school Hitchcockian thriller shot in stunning 8K. The year is 1940 in Kobe, on the eve of the outbreak of World War II. Local merchant and amateur filmmaker Yusaku (Issey Takahashi, *Kill Bill*) senses that things are headed in an unsettling direction. Following a trip to Manchuria, he becomes determined to bring to light the things he witnessed there, and secretly filmed. Meanwhile, his wife Satoko (Japan Society’s 2021 Honoree Yû Aoi) receives a visit from her childhood friend, now a military policeman. He warns her about Yusaku’s seditious ways and reveals that a woman her husband brought back from his trip has died. Satoko confronts Yusaku, but when she discovers his true intentions, she is torn between loyalty to her husband, the life they have built, and the country they call home.

DETAILED PLOT SUMMARY

This includes some spoilers – please be mindful of what you reveal in coverage.

- 1940s Kobe, Japan
- Fukuhara Yusaku’s closest American business partner Mr. Drummond is arrested for leaking “military secrets,” which makes Yusaku recognize nationalism’s tightening grip and a war approaching.
- Yusaku informs his wife Satoko that he will be going away on business in Manchuria with his nephew Fumio.
- Meanwhile, Satoko’s bumps into her childhood friend Taiji, a handsome military officer with a strong sense of nationalism.
- Yusaku and Fumio return, bringing back a mysterious woman named Hiroko. When she is found dead, Taiji suspects that Yusaku’s business trip may have been a cover-up. He summons Satoko, reveals Yusaku’s actions and warns her about her behavior.
- Satoko confronts Yusaku and cracks of distrust start to show.
- Satoko visits a clearly disturbed Fumio and is handed a package for Yusaku.

- Satoko delivers Yusaku the package but insists on knowing the truth. Yusaku relents and tells Satoko that during his visit to Manchuria, he visited the Kwantung Army's research lab where he learned the Japanese army had been secretly experimenting on human captives. He claims Hiroko carried hard evidence of the atrocities being committed. Yusaku reveals that the package Fumio handed her was the English translation of the evidence, which he aims to use to impeach Japan on an international scale, forcing the U.S. to enter into war. Yusaku and Satoko argue over what is more important: justice or happiness.
- While Yusaku is out, Satoko secretly returns to his office, and takes the evidence-filled notebook, along with a newly discovered film tape.
- Satoko hands Taiji the notebook and Fumio is tortured as a result.
- Enraged, Yusaku confronts Satoko and claims he sold her out. Satoko calmly denies this, revealing that she kept the English translation of the notebook as well as the film tape, which contains both the army's experiments on tape and the original Japanese transcription.
- Satoko asks for Yusaku to trust her and Yusaku reveals that he's safe-guarded a longer film tape with Mr. Drummond, who is now in Shanghai. Satoko tells Yusaku that, spy or not, she will follow him as his wife.
- Satoko and Yusaku make plans to go to America, but defection becomes the only way to get there. Satoko and Yusaku plan their course of action and Yusaku suggests making their journeys separately so that he can reclaim the original film tape from Mr. Drummond in Shanghai along the way. Satoko resists, but is convinced by Yusaku with the promise of a swift reunion.
- Yusaku and Satoko buy expensive jewelry and sell their fabric in preparation for their escape.
- The day of their departure, Satoko is dropped off at the port and asked to hide in a wooden crate with the shorter film tape, following Yusaku's instructions. Moments later, military personnel arrive and Satoko is captured.
- Taiji reveals he received an anonymous tip, leading him to find Satoko. When the tape is played, Satoko discovers the film in her possession has been replaced by footage of her amateur acting.
- Yusaku is seen leaving by ship.
- March 1945, Japan is now entrenched in war. Satoko is living in an asylum.
- Satoko is paid a visit by Dr. Nozaki. He tells her that Yusaku was spotted in India but speculates that he may have been killed on his way to Los Angeles. He offers to make arrangements to get Satoko out but she refuses, asserting that the only thing that makes her crazy is her rejection of a shared national madness.
- Kobe is bombed.
- The war ends, August 1945.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Film's Intent

Set in Japan's war torn rural countryside, this film depicts a couple's struggle to overcome distrust and stay faithful to their love. This is my first period film. With a timeline of fixed historical events, I pondered how conflicted people must have felt when they thought of the future.

About The War

This film is not about the war. It serves as the backdrop for this story and acknowledges the acts of ruthless violence Japan has committed on foreign soil. The two protagonists battle with their emotions as they cry over this revelation, which leads them to make a life-changing decision.

What is the purpose of war? That's not an easy question to answer. In History, some wars were fought in the name of justice, while others were invasions. Some people warred in defense, and others, over pride. It's hard to believe politicians and soldiers committed violence because they were possessed by the devil. Japan derailed from the path it originally embarked on, and continued to be fueled by pride and greed. This "madness" was quick to spread among the people too, giving birth to a unified consent of massacre. During the 1940s, everyone in the country battled with this war of "madness".

I wanted to tell the story of those who kept their sanity amid all the chaos, exemplified by the couple in the film. Satoko and Yusaku were living ordinary lives when this "madness" threatened to consume them. Should they escape or succumb to it? I'm not sure if this generation can empathize with Satoko and Yusaku's internal conflict. To a modern Japan that on the surface seems to have regained its freedom and peace, there is no saying when and where we may be approached by this "madness" again.

I hope this film will shed light on the reality of this impending crisis, and create a sense of urgency within us.

Suspense

My film's protagonists are often married couples. This film is no different. Marriage is a unique phenomenon through which men and women of different backgrounds and statuses join together as one, pledging to share the same life and fate.

Though husband and wife are equal, each has a side that the other doesn't know about, which often stays hidden behind a facade of mutual trust. However, a slight turn of

events may cause that unknown side to surface. Before you know it, suspicion and doubt start to rear their ugly heads even during quiet family dinners. I can't find better material for a film than this.

As the camera captures the seemingly ordinary daily lives of the couple, the audience waits with bated breath to see what might happen next. This powerful form of movie expression is what we call "suspense."

Satoko and Yusaku are, hands down, the most suspenseful couple I've captured on film.

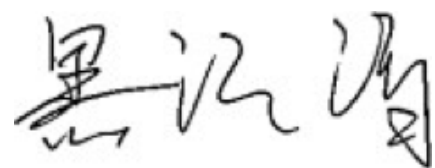
Shooting in 8K

When I first laid eyes on an 8K sample video, I was both taken aback by its stunningly high resolution, and anxious about whether the movie was ready to take on such powerful digital technology. Absolute clarity is great for shooting reality, but not as ideal for telling fictional stories. However, I couldn't deny that I had the desire to work with this technology in my films.

Our goal was not to try to cloak 8K digital with an aura that resembles film, but rather use it to elevate the film artistically. Given that motion pictures were said to be influenced by theater plays and art in the 19th century, it seems to be the natural thing to do. It was great that we set a goal, but we had a problem – 8K movies did not exist anywhere. Thus began our journey of trial and error as we wrestled with this revolutionary technology.

Our technical staff did a brilliant job and *Wife of a Spy* is a film I'm proud of. The extremely fine pixels of 8K brought to life the story's age. It is indeed a moving piece of art.

**Note: This film was originally shot in 8K, but was converted to 2K for the purpose of screening in theaters.*



CAST BIOGRAPHIES

Yu Aoi (Satoko Fukuhara)

Aoi is a Japanese actress, model and TV personality who has become a beloved tour de force in Japan. She made her film debut as Shiori Tsuda in Shunji Iwai's 2001 film *All About Lily Chou-Chou* before going on to star in films such as *Hana and Alice* and *Letters from Nirai Kanai*. For her role in *Hula Girls* and *Birds Without Names*, she was awarded 'Best Supporting Actress' and 'Best Actress' at the 30th and 41st Japan Academy Awards. Aoi is also the recipient of Japan Cut's 2021 CUT ABOVE Award, which recognizes outstanding achievement in Japanese cinema. Her recent film credits include *What a Wonderful Family!*, *Over the Fence*, *Japanese Girls NEver Die*, *Tokyo Ghoul*, *Killing*, *A Long Goodbye*, *Miyamoto*, and *Romance Doll*.

Issey Takahashi (Yusaku Fukuhara)

Takahashi is a Japanese actor and singer whose acting career spans across television, theatre, and film. He is most known for his work on *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, *Whispers of the Heart*, and *Kill Bill: Vol. 2*. Takahashi is also the recipient of numerous accolades, which include the Elan d'or Award for Newcomer of the Year, and the Nikkan Sports Film Award for Best Supporting Actor. Takahashi's recent film and television credits include *Naotora: The Lady Warlord*, *Quartet*, *Laugh It Up!*, *Miracles*, *MIKAZUKI: Crescent Moon*, *Tokyo Bachelors*, *The Lies She Loved*, *Blank13*, *Recall*, *Million Dollar Man*, *Until I Meet September's Love*, *Samurai Shifters*, and *Romance Doll*.

Masahiro Higashide (Yasuharu Tsumori)

Higashide is a Japanese actor and model, who made his film debut in Daihachi Yoshida's 2012 drama *The Kirishima Thing*. He is most known for his role of Ryohei Maruko / Baku Torii in Ryusuke Hamaguchi's *Asako I & II*, which earned him nominations at the 73rd Mainichi Film Awards, the 61st Blue ribbon Awards and won him the Best Actor award at the 40th Yokohama Film Festival. His other notable films include Eiichirô Hasumi's *Over Drive* and Yoshitaka Mori's *Satoshi: A Move for Tomorrow*.

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Kiyoshi Kurosawa (Director)

Kiyoshi Kurosawa is a Japanese film director, screenwriter, film critic and professor at the Tokyo University of the Arts, best known for his contributions to the Japanese horror genre. He first began making 8mm films in university, making his feature film directorial debut in 1983 with *Kandagawa Wars*. Kurosawa achieved international acclaim with his 1997 crime thriller *Cure*, which he followed up with other notable works including *License to Live* (1998), *Barren Illusion* (1999), and *Charisma* (1999). Kurosawa's work has been frequently recognized in festivals worldwide. *Pulse* (2001) was awarded the Film Critics Award in the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival. *Bright Future* and *Doppelganger* were official selections at Cannes in 2003. *Retribution* (2006) screened at the Venice Film Festival. *Tokyo sonata* won the Jury Prize at Cannes and Best Film at the 2009 Asian Film Awards. Kurosawa's television mini-series *Penance* (2011) screened at the Hong Kong International Film Festival and accomplished an unusual feat when it was screened out of competition at the 2012 Venice Film Festival. His recent work *Journey to the Shore* (2015) and *Before We Vanish* (2017) were both screened in the Un Certain Regard category at the Cannes Film Festival in their respective years, with the latter earning Kurosawa the prize for Best Director. In his cinematic return to the horror genre, *Creepy* (2016) premiered at the 66th Berlin International Film Festival and his last film *To the End of the Earth* (2019) was screened as a closing film at the Locarno Film Festival. For *Wife of a Spy*, Kurosawa won the Silver Lion for Best Direction at the 77th Venice International Film Festival.

Ryusuke Hamaguchi (Co-Screenwriter)

Ryusuke Hamaguchi is a Japanese director and screenwriter. His graduation project *Passion* (2008) was selected for the San Sebastian Film Festival and his three-part documentary about survivors of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake garnered positive critical acclaim. His breakthrough feature film *Happy Hour* earned a special mention for its script at the 2015 Locarno Film Festival and a shared Best Actress award for its four non-professional female leads. In 2018, his film *Asako I & II* was selected to compete for the Palme d'Or at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival. In 2021, his anthology drama *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy*, which tells three distinct stories about contemporary Japanese women, won the Silver Bear jury Prize at Berlinale. His last film *Drive My Car* (2021), an adaptation of Haruki Murakami's short story of the same name, was also selected to compete for the Palme d'Or at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, taking home the award for Best Screenplay, the FIPRESCI Prize and the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury.

Tadashi Nohara (Co-Screenwriter)

Tadashi Nohara is a Japanese writer and director. He studied at the Graduate School of Film and New Media at the Tokyo University of the Arts and received a Master of Film degree in 2009. While a student, he worked alongside Ryusuke Hamaguchi and was taught by legendary auteur Kiyoshi Kurosawa. During this time, he directed *Kyoko* (2009), which was part of the omnibus feature *Lush Life* (2009) originally written by Kotaro Isaka. In the same year, Nohara also directed *Elephant Love*. After gaining more experience as a TV assistant director and computer graphics production manager, he moved to Kobe City in 2013 to work on Hamaguchi's *Happy Hour* (2015) as a co-writer and a producer. In 2017, he organized an acting workshop in Taiwan as a resident artist at Bamboo Curtain Studio.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

Please tell us how this movie came about.

A few years back, I received a call from Tadashi Nohara. NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) was looking to shoot a movie in Kobe City, using an 8K camera. Tadashi was my student from Tokyo University of the Arts at the time and already had a few movies under his belt as a director. I didn't think of it as an official offer from a producer, but rather as a request from a former student. I remembered telling him, "If you can come up with something interesting, I might consider it." The conversation ended there and I soon forgot about it.

Six months later, Ryusuke Hamaguchi and Tadashi came to me with the plotline for *Wife of A Spy*. It was more a long summary of a movie rather than a story. When I asked if we had the budget for it, neither of them had an answer. So, I told them to think about it and soon forgot about it again.

Some time passed, Tadashi called again. This time it was to introduce the producer, and things started to move along.

How did you end up casting Yu Aoi and Issey Takahashi? What was it like working with them?

I had the privilege to work with Yu a few times before, and I knew she had an extraordinary gift in acting. She has a pleasant disposition and is easy to work with on set. I pondered who would be a fitting male lead and asked those around me, "Who is the best actor in his late thirties in Japan's cinema scene?" Their answers were the same, Issey Takahashi. I had heard about him before and was keen to cast him. I was very happy that Yu and Issey were both quick to say yes when I asked.

The behavior and speech of the characters are complex and hard to adopt. However, both actors delivered remarkable performances. There was nothing for me to direct when working with such exceptional actors. On set, I focused on how I could shoot the film to best exhibit their acting. For example, we filmed a scene where Yu cried. It wasn't in the script, nor did I ask for it but it was her impulse and we kept it. In another screen test, Yu also cried. I felt that it didn't match the setting of the scene and told her not to cry. The result was a Satoko that didn't shed a single tear, yet brimmed with utter sadness. It was truly an amazing feat. She would tell me if she had a few interpretations of a scene and asked me which I preferred. She didn't let her feelings control the way she acted. Issey is similar in this aspect. The air of mystery and primitive enchantment surrounding Yusaku is all part of Issey's calculated acting. And yet, when it comes to embracing the doubtful Satoko, he is filled with genuine sincerity. The two of them adjusted their acting bit by bit, giving us the luxury of having endless options to choose from.

I was also amazed at how well they did with their lengthy lines. You could listen to them all day long. The language is not just an expression of their feelings, but a skill they wield to attract people to listen.

Above all else, I was most impressed with the fact that they never once asked me why their character acted a certain way or said a certain line. It's important to know the psychological motivation of the character, but it's not something that I have the perfect answer to. It can only be justified by the actors exploring and finding out for themselves. Both actors were able to complete this time-consuming task in a short time. This made things less complicated on set, and everyone was able to do their work with ease. Such ease naturally gave birth to a desire to want to create something better and to look forward to the next task at hand.

How was it like working with Ryusuke Hamaguchi and Tadashi Nohara, bringing their script to life?

First and foremost, I would like to thank them for writing such an intriguing script. They are my students from Tokyo University of the Arts, but their talent has nothing to do with my teaching. Not just their talent in directing, but in story-telling too. This script is the perfect example of that. The love of a married couple gets entangled in a myriad of external influences, which leads to a series of strategic deceptions. That's not a story I am capable of writing. What I can write is, at most, the clashing of swords between the military and the spies. How they thought of crafting dialogue inspired by Japanese movies in the 1940s, is beyond me. The lines are long. As the writers of *Happy Hour*, I pretty much expected that from them. But, to compress all this into a two-hour film? The toil and labor I put into condensing the story is perhaps something I can take credit for. In any case, I was very thankful that the actors were able to deliver these complicated and lengthy lines without changing an iota of it.

What were you particular about when making this film? Tell us about the challenges you faced.

If I were shooting a film set in this era, all I'd have to do is roll the camera and I could capture what I need. That is difficult for a film set in the past. It's a test of the creator's interpretation. Even if historical facts remain unchanged, what I choose to capture will reveal my opinion. It may be convenient to fall back on the fictionalization of the story. Nevertheless, it's a heavy burden that I had to bear. Imagine being held responsible even for the flag that flaps in the background. I couldn't afford to be careless. However, considering this film was not a stage for me to express my political standpoint, I have come to terms with the fact that not everything has to be accurate.

As it was my first period piece, the preparation of sets, props, and wardrobes was immensely stressful and time-consuming for me. Every extra on set needed to wear the right clothes and have an appropriate hairstyle. Without any knowledge of what it was actually like, my only reference was to imitate what I saw in old clips. Ladies had long hair, so that was easy to imitate. The guys, on the other hand, were more challenging. No sideburns, no bangs. I made it a point to have all their sideburns shaved and to keep their bangs at bay. My biggest struggle

was with the wardrobe. We couldn't use old clothes from that era, so the wardrobe for the main cast, from their daily wear to military uniforms, was all handmade. This in turn gave us the advantage of dressing up the characters with what fit them best. The amazing thing was, once their clothes and hairstyles were changed, even the inexperienced extras naturally adopted the mannerisms of the day and age. I find that fascinating. Kickstarting psychological change through external components has certainly enriched this film.

Coincidentally, you will be showcasing a movie that tells the story of those whose lives were torn apart by the war, to a world that is currently embroiled in the woes of COVID-19. How do you feel about this?

To me, what's happening in the world right now is incomparable to history. From a personal point of view, I do feel that the current situation is somewhat hysterical. Should a cluster be found in one cinema hall, the whole cinema will need to be closed. That's what happened to the concert venues. The world has tried all sorts of ways to figure out how the virus spreads, and how to mitigate the risk. It would be great if there were a proper scientific explanation to show not all human contact is bad. But the reality is that whenever an infection happens, everything in its vicinity is banned. I dread this feeling of hysterics, and yet at the same time, I find myself being critical of those who don't put on their mask when they're outside.

I didn't coach the actors much for this film, but I did tell them to bear in mind the sense of urgency that was present in that period. One moment of truth may overturn your ordinary way of life. Even if you're trying to lead a normal life, society is watching you for any possible signs of deviation. I told them this is the kind of trepidation that the people of those days harbored. That terrible feeling of being locked up, represented by the overpowering presence of the military police, is an emotion that I feel our world right now can empathize with.

**Further Reading: "[A Famed Horror Director Mines Japan's Real-Life Atrocities](#)"
Interview by Ben Dooley, The New York Times, October 10, 2020**