



HippFest

18 — 22 March 2026



Apart from You

Dir. Mikio Naruse | Japan | 1933 N/C 12A | b&w | Japanese intertitles with English surtitles | 1h 12m

With: Mitsuko Yoshikawa, Akio Ison

Performing live: John Sweeney (piano)

Programme notes: Dr. Kelly Robinson

Sun 22 March 15:30 - 16:15

Screening material courtesy of Janus Films/The Criterion Collection and Shochiku Co. Ltd

At the renowned Le Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone, Italy in 2005 there was a stunning programme of Japanese silent films that, by coincidence, commemorated both the centenary of the birth of Mikio Naruse, one of the featured directors, and the 110th anniversary of the Shochiku company, where Naruse and many others started their career. The programme had several glorious films including those by better known directors, Yasujiro Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi. In the catalogue's introduction Donald Richie highlighted the destruction of perhaps 90% of all Japanese cinema pre-1945. Despite this, it was an eye opening programme. Every now and then a particular film would finish and I would be left reeling, feeling as though I'd seen something by a master filmmaker. These were my first Naruse encounters and I was blown away. There were four features screened in total and one of them is the film you are seeing today, the short but almighty, *Apart from You*.

'From the youngest age, I have thought that the world we live in betrays us; this thought remains with me.'

Mikio Naruse

Naruse was born in 1905, the youngest of three children, to an embroiderer and his wife. His childhood was an impoverished one and instead of finishing school he entered into a two year technical school. When his father died the family became dependent on his older brother. At 15 years old Naruse started work at the Shochiku company as a prop man at the Tokyo Kamata studios. After his mother's death in 1922, Naruse had nothing more to do with his siblings. He rented a room from a family who ran a sushi business and every time they moved, as their business failed, he followed them. There is a sad story about how the young Naruse fell in love with a waitress who worked in a cafe local to the studios but that she killed herself when he didn't respond to her letters.

Shochiku was the only major studio operating in Tokyo from 1923 to 1934 a period in which the city underwent significant reconstruction and expansion following the 1923 earthquake. From 1920 to 1936, Shochiku-Kamata produced 1,249 films, of which only 50 remain. In 1930, ten years after having joined the studio, Naruse finally got to direct his



HippFest

18 — 22 March 2026



first film, a slapstick comedy *Mr and Mrs Swordplay*. The majority of his early films were two to four reel comedies that took only a few days to shoot. He gained a reputation as a studio director who managed to make films on time and in budget yet early on in his career a fellow director at the studio, Ozu, called attention to his talent.

Accounts of Naruse are sparse, he didn't give many interviews, being adverse to publicity and self promotion. He was said to be a stoical, taciturn person with a bleak world view, no doubt a result of his rather unhappy youth. He surprised his friends when he married the vivacious *Wife? Be Like a Rose!* (1935) star Sachiko Chiba, whose acting he had denigrated to her on set, but the marriage only lasted three years; maybe she never truly forgave him! His second wife Tsumeko Naruse described him in a 1993 interview as a very 'serious' person, almost like an 'old-time samurai' who had 'no cracks in his character.' Actor Tatsuya Nakadai from *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* (1959) said 'I don't know about his inner life. He was a very quiet man.' And yet his films are bursting with feeling.

Apart from You, is Naruse's first feature film that he wrote and directed. It is a drama about two geishas Terikuku (Mizukubo Sumiko) and her older friend Kikue (Yoshikawa Mitsuko) and their efforts to educate Kikue's son Yoshio (Akio Isono) in more ways than one. Kikue is having a professional crisis of age, when she searches the mirror for grey hairs she discovers there are too many to pull out and her regular client is showing interest in the younger geisha. She is caught in a bind where she needs to earn money to pay for her son's education but he is ashamed of her and has become an Angry Young Man, drinking and hanging out with a local gang of hoodlums and not going to school. Terikuku is similarly in an unhappy predicament, working to support her family who live in poverty and worried about her younger sister who is destined to be sold to a brothel.

The film is set amongst the working poor at the peripheries of the city. We see laundry hanging in the porch, clothes are torn from over wearing. There's a sense of people caught in cycles of poverty that undoubtedly Naruse would have glimpsed first hand. Empathy for the poor is extended profoundly to the women who are navigating it. Indeed, many of Naruse's films have women at their centres. Wives, widows, businesswomen, mothers, geishas, characters who often reside at the edge of respectability. The extraordinary ability women have to multitask and perform different roles to different people will be familiar to women in the present day! Kikue is a companion and distraction to the men at work, a supportive friend to Kikue, a source of income to her family (including a lazy, violent alcoholic father) and a mentor/girlfriend to Kikue's son Yoshio.

It feels somewhat lucky to have these silent films at all when you think that most of the rest of the world was transitioning to sound films between 1927 and 1930. Japan was still making silent films way into the 1930s, in part because of the popularity of the benshi, live narrators who were often as much a draw as the film itself. But the industry also resisted the conversion because of economics, the costs of converting the studios and theatres was enormous.



HippFest

18 – 22 March 2026



Apart from You is silent film working at the peak of its powers: expressive camera movement, for instance rapid dollies in to a character's face at a moment of great emotion, and fast cutting, it opens with a striking scene that emulates the gangster film. Naruse composes the frame beautifully, using depth of field to position characters for maximum expressiveness: Terikuku watching Kikue, Terikuku's little brother watching Yoshio. It is such a tender film, of restrained acting, small glances and gestures; lots of close ups of hands. There's a lovely detail where when Yoshio overhears a quarrel his hands moves to his mouth. Terikuku's younger brother, ever watchful, then does the same. There's an anticipation of Vittorio De Sica's brand of Italian neorealism with its social conscience and poetic realism here.

Naruse eventually grew dissatisfied with Shochiku. In 1934 he left the Kamata Studio for PLC at Toho where he made films for the rest of his working life. The films of the 1950s eventually bought Naruse into the canon of international art cinema and he's now seen as the fourth giant amongst Japanese film directors along with Mizoguchi, Ozu and Kurosawa. The style of his later films is somewhat different to the early 30s films but he still continued to explore female subjectivity. Like many of his subsequent films, *Apart from You* has an understated ending, but still one with immense power. Nakadai, who collaborated with Naruse on many of his later films, could have been speaking about his silent films too when he observed how Naruse evaded the conventions of a happy ending: 'nihilism is too strong a word but something like a woman's resignation to her fate and even as she resigns herself to it, she faces it, head on, courageously.'

KELLY ROBINSON

Kelly Robinson is a programmer and filmmaker, based in London.