

My Geisha

What's a wife to do? Her husband, a famous director, wants to make *Madama Butterfly*. Although she has starred in all his greatest pictures, this time he wants to use a Japanese actress in the role. He leaves for Japan, and she follows soon after with his producer. There, she sees her husband in a room full of geishas. The actress makes a bet with the producer that she can dress as a geisha and that her husband will never know it's her. She dons a kimono and white makeup, and wins the bet. Not only does her husband not recognize her, he's completely captivated by the new "geisha" and wants her to star as *Madama Butterfly*. Oops. From there, it's the usual delightful hijinks of hoaxes gone awry, hurt feelings, love, and happy endings, all played against the beautiful scenery of Japan.

Released by Paramount in 1962, *My Geisha* was a comic delight, thanks to a stellar cast that included Shirley MacLaine, international superstar Yves Montand, Bob Cummings, and Edward G. Robinson. It featured a witty, colorful script by Norman Krasna. In the director's seat was Jack Cardiff, who'd started off as one of the greatest color cinematographers ever, working on such classics as *Black Narcissus*, *A Matter of Life and Death*, *The Red Shoes*, *The African Queen*, and *War and Peace*. While his director credits never quite reached the heights of his cameraman credits, he helmed some wonderful films, including *Sons and Lovers*, *The Lion*, *The Long Ships*, *Young Cassidy*, *The Liquidator* and *Dark of the Sun*. He also

held the distinction of directing the only film ever made in the Smell-O-Vision process, *Scent of Mystery*. *My Geisha* was a perfect film for him, given its bright Technicolor look and the incredibly scenic vistas of Japan, all captured lovingly by Japanese cameraman, Shunichiro Nakao.

But it's Shirley MacLaine who is the heart and soul of the film. By that point, MacLaine had proven adept as both a dramatic actress and a comic actress who could not only deliver the laughs, but could deliver a tear or two as well. She is totally believable in her geisha attire and make-up, and it's completely understandable that the character's husband would be fooled. MacLaine actually lived with geishas for a couple of weeks prior to filming. Her performance has it all – it's endearing, funny, and touching. Yves Montand is charming, Bob Cummings shines as MacLaine's co-star, and Edward G. Robinson is his usual irascible self as a studio bigwig. The film received an Academy Award nomination for Edith Head's gorgeous costumes.

But what takes the film to a whole other level is the radiant score by Franz Waxman. There are many ways to approach scoring a comedy: you can accentuate the humor, you can underline the laughs, or you can try to make the music comic. Waxman's approach was to score the story being told and to let the comedy speak for itself. Hence his music is filled to the brim with dramatic scoring and beautiful melody, including his exquisite main theme. That approach was perfect

because it makes us care about the characters and the story.

Because the film is about a moviemaker making a film of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, there are also a few excerpts from the opera, conducted by Waxman himself. Interestingly, he uses no Puccini references at all in his score. Waxman seemed to have a real affinity for and love of Japan: *My Geisha* and his great score for *Sayonara* are musical proof of that. Certainly his music here is as achingly beautiful as Puccini's, making use of occasional Japanese tonalities, colors, and instruments. It is music that's rich and varied and music that works perfectly both within the film and as a stand-alone listening experience apart from the visuals. Waxman was one of the greatest of all film composers, and his work for Paramount was especially brilliant, with such films as *Sunset Blvd.*, *A Place in the Sun*, *Botany Bay*, *Elephant Walk*, *Stalag 17*, *Sorry, Wrong Number*, *Come Back, Little Sheba*, and *Career*, to name a few.

My Geisha is making its CD debut and we're very pleased to present the entire score. The LP release left off several wonderful cues, but now we have the score complete, from the original three-track session tapes in glorious stereo sound. We include the few *Madama Butterfly* selections and some bonus material.

— Bruce Kimmel