

Sex, freckles and Japanese taxes

By PAUL GAZZOLA

It would have been understandable if director Juzo Itami made a derogatory film about Marusa — the Japanese tax police. After all, Itami paid 90 per cent of the profits from his first film, *The Funeral*, in taxes. His third film, *A Taxing Woman* satirizes and humanizes Japanese tax collectors and evaders.

Ryoko Itakura (Nobuko Miyamoto, Itami's wife) is a tax collector, cheery and seemingly unimposing (she even has freckles). She is ruthless in her job, sparing neither shop owners nor pinball parlours, counting cars and customers wherever she goes.

With his twisted walk and slicked-back hair, Hideki Gondo (Tsutomu Yamazaki) looks like the kind of guy who cheats on his taxes and hides the evidence with his mistress of the month. The owner of numerous "love hotels," Gondo eventually falls under the attention of Ryoko's eagle eyes. Their duel of wits is amusing, as Gondo attempts to charm the tax collector out of the chase and into his bed.

Although viewers can identify with the characters, there are no heroes or villains to cheer or boo in this movie.



A TAXING WOMAN: Hideki Gondo (Tsutomu Yamazaki) is worried because he can't hide his secrets from the taxing woman forever.

The satire of *A Taxing Woman* is subtle. Miyamoto's role is described by Itami as "a female version of Columbo." The rest of the tax inspectors fare no better. Itami portrays them as competent, and professional, but laughable as tax department gun-slingers. *A Taxing Woman* is reminiscent, in a weird way, of "The Untouchables," with Ryodo as

Eliot Ness and Gondo as Al Capone. According to Itami, money has replaced the family and state as the way to massage your ego. He says that distinguished ancestry no longer impress people and a huge bank account does. Itami does not see this attitude as all bad. His film allows equality and the social classes to move closer together.

At 127 minutes, the film is long and sometimes predictable (you know that Gondo's old mistress is going to snitch on him), but impressive performances overshadow its weaknesses. Be careful not to file your income tax return, or a tax collector from Marusa might come knocking. She might even have freckles.

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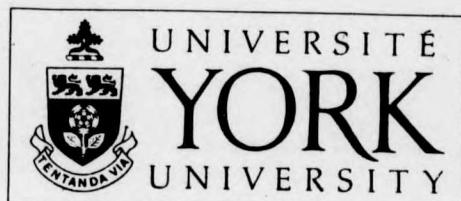
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