

# Alex de Grassi

## A Story of Floating Weeds



*The main character, Kihachi and his mistress Otaka.  
\*Image Courtesy Shochiku Co., Ltd*

*A Story of Floating Weeds* is one of the most successful and critically acclaimed films by the legendary Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu. "Floating Weeds, drifting down the leisurely river of our lives," has long been a favored metaphor in Japanese prose and poetry and, in this 1934 film, it refers to a group of traveling actors who seem to be drifting aimlessly, carried by currents beyond their control.

The film comes to life with Alex de Grassi's original acoustic guitar score based on a pentatonic blues motif that also suggests the sound of the koto, a Japanese harp-like instrument. Separate musical themes assigned to each of the five central characters combine and clash as the drama unfolds and the characters' lives become inextricably entwined. De Grassi says, "While some scenes are very tightly scored, others are loosely based on a rhythm or a short melodic fragment that allows for spontaneous improvisation—each performance is unique." Ozu's straight-cut, mosaic style of filmmaking and his use of low camera angles, supported by de Grassi's inventive use of a wide range of sonorities and extended guitar techniques, make for larger-than-life characters and give this timeless tale a contemporary edge.

*A Story of Floating Weeds* revolves around the lovable ne'er-do-well character of Kihachi, the head of an itinerant acting troupe visiting a small town where he fathered a son years before. The son does not know that Kihachi is his father, but the leading lady of the troupe—Kihachi's mistress—finds out and plots her revenge. Though both of the youth's parents had hoped for some permanence and a family life, the end of the film finds the troupe leader again on the road. He continues to "drift down the river" and one of Ozu's major themes, the dissolution of the family, is again played out.

Alex de Grassi was commissioned by the New York Guitar Festival to compose and perform his original score for Yasujiro Ozu's 1934 silent film *A Story of Floating Weeds*. The premiere was held January 28, 2006 at Flushing Town Hall in New York. Reconstruction of the score was commissioned by the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois for its 2009 Guitar Festival.

