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KAKUSHI TORIDE NO SAN AKUNIN (*The Hidden Fortress*), Japan, 1958

Cert: A. *dist:* Contemporary. *p.c.:* Toho. *p:* Masumi Fujimoto. *assoc.p./d:* Akira Kurosawa. *sc:* Ryuzo Kikushima, Hideo Oguni, Shinobu Hashimoto, Akira Kurosawa. *ph:* Ichio Yamazaki. Toho-Scope. *a.d.:* Yoshiro Muraki. *m:* Masaru Sato. *sd.rec.:* Fumio Yanoguchi. *l.p.:* Toshiro Mifune (*Rokurota Makabe*), Misa Uehara (*Princess Yukihiime*), Minoru Chiaki (*Tahei*), Kamatari Fujiwara (*Matashichi*), Takashi Shimura (*Izumii Nagakura*), Susumu Fujita (*Hyoe Tadokoro*), Eiko Miyoshi (*Old woman*), Toshiko Higuchi (*Farmer's daughter*), Kichijiro Ueda (*Girl-dealer*). 11,031 ft. 123 mins.

Medieval Japan. Feudal lord Yamana defeats his neighbour Akizuki. Princess Yukihiime, the latter's heiress, survives and hides in a fortress with Rokurota, a samurai. Uneasy at the thought that the Princess may escape with her clan's war funds, some 170 pounds of gold bars, into the neighbouring province held by Hayakawa, friendly to the Akizukis, Yamana orders a thorough search for the gold and its owner. As it happens, the gold is unearthed by two ragged, low-grade samurai, Tahei and Matashichi, but their joy is short-lived when Rokurota bursts upon them. He sacrifices his sister, disguised as the Princess, to Yamana to cover the real Princess's escape, loads the gold bars like firewood on a horse, disguises Yukihiime as a poor deaf girl, then leaves for Hayakawa's domain with Tahei and Matashichi following as servants. On the way through Yamana's province, Rokurota is unmasked by Yamana's warrior, Hyoe Tadokoro, who challenges him to a sword fight. Rokurota wins, spares Tadokoro's life, and returns to the Princess. The escapers next become involved in a procession of fire-worshippers who insist on burning the precious firewood, leaving Rokurota the next day to retrieve what he can of the hot metal.

Only a few paces from Hayakawa's border Tahei and Matashichi give the game away and escape, leaving the party to the mercy of Yamana. The day of their execution arrives, the Princess resigns herself to her fate, when Tadokoro intervenes and allows them to escape. Later, Tahei and Matashichi are arrested and brought before Yukihiime and Rokurota, restored to their former dignity. Rokurota hands them a piece of gold and sends them packing.

The theme of *The Hidden Fortress* is that of primitive epic literature, and in this respect has a real resemblance to the traditional Hollywood Western. On the other hand the stereotype characters are rigidly hieratic rather than reflections of the Western's egalitarianism: the two peasants are blundering cowards, the samurai retainer is depicted as an example to them, altogether cleaner and cleverer and nobler, the autocratic Princess demands rather than requires the protection of her vassal. Given this fiercely feudal (compared to the Hollywood Western) chivalric code and rough military ethic, Kurosawa does a good polished job of entertainment. But he does not achieve, because he nowhere attempts, the subtleties of *Rashomon* and *Seven Samurai*.

Cinematically, the film is also conventional, following the dramatic development closely and little more, sending horses and riders and milling crowds hurtling across the wide screen or isolating single characters in heroic vistas. The most beautiful images, however, are those of violence—the pitched battles and hand-to-hand combats—where the camera moves in close and the cutting accelerates. Apart from a growing feeling of length outstripping content, the film's other disappointment is its score. This sort of romantically swelling, full Western orchestra rising behind the musical Kabuki voices is very distracting; all the more so since, in some passages, there is a use of a more apposite Kabuki music.

The acting is good with the exception of Misa Uehara, playing the Princess in shorts, tight-fitting blouse, in fact full principal boy rig and manner, so that—despite the underlying haughtiness—the actress sacrifices credibility for style. And when she reiterates a phrase from the fire-worshippers' philosophy ("Kindle your life and burn it out, live it with all your might") while awaiting her own death, one is made only too aware of the incongruity of so pale a poetic reflection coming in such growling Kabuki tones. Otherwise, credit is due to the unsubtle but often funny Laurel and Hardy antics of the ragged soldiers, and to Toshiro Mifune's roaring and lunging performance as General Rokurota.

Suitability: A, B.

J.W.R.

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