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A Bittersweet Movie from Japan

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By JOE BALTAKE

"Dodes-Ka-Den" is the crazy-sounding title of a not-so-crazy 1970 comedy-drama by Akira Kurosawa, master film director and Japan's foremost filmmaker. It's touchingly and universally bittersweet — although not nearly as great as some of Kurosawa's earlier works.

Four area cultural groups — the Museum of Art, the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, the Pennsylvania Ballet and TLA Cinema — joined forces with Janus Films to present the movie's East Coast premiere last night at TLA Cinema, 334 South st.

Impressive, indeed. Now if only the film were deserving of such celebration.

A classic it isn't. A pleasant experience, it is. It's sad and funny and vividly presented — but nowhere near the throbbing artistry for which Kurosawa is reputed.

THE TITLE REFERS to the "trolley" sounds made by a retarded adolescent (Yoshitaka Zushi) who fancies himself an engineer. The boy is our guide through an impoverished village



NOBORU MITSUTAH

... as a beggar

of ramshackle huts in modern-day Japan.

We're introduced to the various inhabitants, witnessing first-hand their sorrows, pains, joys, hopes and dreams. It's all simplistic and often clichéd — but never sentimental or laden with pity.

Kurosawa respects his characters — each of whom is treated with compassion and presented as a full-bodied, three-dimensional being.

His camera restlessly jumps back and forth among the various townspeople: a pathetic beggar (Noboru Mitsutahi) and his son (Hiroyuki Kawase); a mistreated working girl (Tomoko Yamazaki) and her cruel uncle (Tatsuo Matsumura); a lame man (Junzaburo Ban) and his unsociable wife (Kiyoko Tange), and others.

THERE'S AN ABUNDANCE of tears and laughter here — and even a mildly amusing episode depicting a "wife-swapping" set-up.

All is nicely bound together by the delightful music score of Toru Takemitsu and the haunting, eye-soothing color photography. This is Kurosawa's first use of color photography.

"Dodes-Ka-Den" is essentially a long "little" movie. It rambles blissfully for 140 minutes, telling warm, human tales of hope and determination. There's no great message here. Just a lot of good storytelling.