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NEW YORKER FILMS

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An Actor's Revenge

Directed by Kon Ichikawa

Cast: Kazuo Hasegawa, Ayako Wakao, Ganjiri Nakamura, Fujiko Yamamoto.

1963. Japan. In Japanese with English subtitles.

114 minutes. Color. Scope prints only.

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The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

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The Japanese Film
Monday, April 20/8:00
Tuesday, April 21/2:00, 5:30

Yukinojo Hengei (The Revenge of Yukinojo) - ACTOR'S REVENGE

A Daiei Production, 1963. Directed by Kon Ichikawa. Written by Natto Wada after the original story by Otokichi Mikami and based on a former script by Ito Daisuke and Tennosuke Kinugasa. Photographed by Setsuo Kobayashi. Art direction by Yoshio Nishioka. Music by Yasushi Akutagawa. With Kazuo Hasegawa in the double role of Yukinojo and Yamitaro; Fujiko Yamamoto as Ohatsu; Ayako Wakao as Namiji; Raizo Ichikawa as Hirutaro; Shintaro Katsu as Hoin. 114 minutes. Courtesy of the Japan Film Library Council.

True or not, the story goes that Ichikawa, never on very good terms with his producing company, was particularly in bad with them after the the 1962 Hakai, which had cost a lot of money and brought in little. More, it would seem, as punishment than anything else, the company decided to make him next do a new version of Yukinojo. This tired melodrama, old-fashioned when it originally appeared back in the 'twenties, was, of course, just the film not for Ichikawa to do -- it was like asking Bunuel to remake Stella Dallas. Nonetheless, he saw possibilities in it. He and his wife, Natto Wada, examined the creaking scenario and found it so bad as to be good. In casting he insisted upon Kazuo Hasegawa, in films almost from their inception, an aging, but still popular matinee idol, and a very talented if occasionally over emotional actor. Then he set out, as he said, to see what the movies could do.

He produced among other things a tour-de-force, willfully scrambled stage and screen, tried every color experiment he could think of, and created one of the most visually entertaining films ever to come from Japan. At the same time, however, he made a very disturbing film. The love scenes are astonishing with the aging but dignified Hasegawa playing a man playing a woman to the young Ayako Wakao. The innuendo,always to be inferred, gives all of these scenes an ambivalent edge which, intended or not, makes them fairly unforgettable. Finally, with the spirit of "camp" never far away, never being certain whether Hasegawa is being made a fool of or is giving a great performance, one begins to feel little by little the pathos and terror which must have always lurked in this hackneyed little story.

Ichikawa would, it must be said, deny all of the above. He maintains that he loved making Yukinojo and such slyness as this was none of his intent. One might add that Japanese audiences disliked the picture and that, under the title,An Actor's Revenge, it is very popular in Europe, if relatively unknown in America.

D.R.

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AN ACTOR'S REVENGE

Directed by Kon Ichikawa. A director with a powerfully eclectic style and a perverse imagination, Kon Ichikawa attracted international attention in the late '50's with such films as The Burmese Harp, The Key, Conflagration, and Fires on the Plain. These films did little, however, to enhance his commercial standing, and so, following a string of box-office failures, Ichikawa was handed as penance The Revenge of Yukinojo, a hoary melodrama first filmed back in the 1920's. As Japanese film historian Donald Richie has noted, "It was like asking Bunuel to remake Stella Dallas." Far from being discouraged, Ichikawa decided that this was an ideal opportunity to "see what movies can do," so he pulled out all the stops. The result -- known in the West under the title An Actor's Revenge -- is one of the most curious masterpieces ever to emerge from the Japanese cinema.

For the central role of Yukinojo, Ichikawa selected Kazuo Hasegawa, one of Japan's most venerable actors, a colorful performer with more than a little touch of ham. Yukinojo, the hero, is a celebrated Kabuki actor in the time of the Shogunate. He specializes in female impersonations. When the story opens, Yukinojo, standing alone on a stage swept with paper "snow," is on the verge of carrying out a long-nurtured revenge against the three highly-placed villains who were responsible for his parents' miserable deaths many years ago. The keystone of Yukinojo's scheme is the seduction of the beautiful and innocent daughter of the evil Lord Dobe. Women, it should be

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noted, find Yukinojo irresistible in his female persona, and, perhaps in recognition of the theatrical nature of his revenge, he carries his transvestite role offstage into the seduction scenes -- falsetto, mincing, and all. Yukinojo falls in love with his victim, but he must play his bitter part to the end. Set in a time of economic depression and social unrest, the actor's revenge is interrupted by a colorful assortment of pickpockets, burglars, and fanatics, who are continually popping up to serve as a running audience for Yukinojo's "performance."

Ichikawa embroiders the hyper-elaborate plot with every device at his disposal: elaborate sight-gags, Russian-style montages, fantastically colored sets, wild lighting effects, intricate shifts between different levels of reality, a sarcastically incongruous musical score that ranges from pure schmaltz to cocktail-lounge jazz, spectacular swordfights every few minutes (the hero, despite his feminine apparel, is a wizard with the blade), and a haunting epilogue that transports Yukinojo to a mythical existence "beyond the windblown plain." This rich and strange brew seems to resemble nothing else in movies -- perhaps the best comparison would be to a multi-layered jazz improvisation, by a master like Charlie Parker or John Coltrane, that breathes new life into a tired old tune.

Underneath all the razzle-dazzle, Ichikawa never loses sight of the film's central theme, and, by the end, he has made a moving comment on the actor-hero trapped by his roles that seems to reflect the futility of all roles, sexual or otherwise. Although considerably kinkier and more radical than its predecessors in the field, <u>An Actor's Revenge</u>

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ranks with The Golden Coach and Children of Paradise as one of the cinema's great meditations on life and the theater.

"Something of a masterpiece -- though just what kind is difficult to say ... [Ichikawa] produced, among other things, a tour-de-force, willfully scrambled stage and screen, tried every color experiment he could think of, and created one of the most visually entertaining films ever to come from Japan. At the same time, however, being Ichikawa, he made a very disturbing picture. The love scenes -- with the aging but dignified Hasegawa playing a woman to the young Ayako Wakao -- are both arresting and troubling. An innuendo, always to be inferred, gives all of these scenes an ambivalent edge which, intended or not, makes them fairly unforgettable. Finally, with the spirit of camp never far away, never being certain whether Hasegawa is being made a fool of or is giving a great performance which the director is merely recording, one begins to feel little by little the pathos and terror which must always have lurked in this hackneyed little story."

Donald Richie, Japanese Cinema

An Actor's Revenge (Yukinojo Hengei). 1963. Color. Cinemascope.

Scope prints only. 114 minutes.

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The Soho Weekly News August 30, 1979

THE LUSH LOOK OF A DRAG QUEEN'S REVENGE

Hasegawa as Yokinojo: the most wonderfully perverse conceit of all

Rob Baker

An Actor's Revenge
Public Theater (thru Sunday)

If, like some of the more secretly perverse among us, you take as much delight in how a film looks as in what it says — if, in fact, you downright wallow in films of unabashed visual lushness and real cinematographic inventiveness, cherishing them without shame, like a pig does mud — then walk, hop, skip or roller-skate as fast as you can over to the Public Theater this week (only) to see Kon Ichikawa's *An Actor's Revenge*. Not that the film is devoid of thematic content — and fascinatingly idiosyncratic content at that — but because few films have made such extraordinary use of the cinemascope screen or color photography.

A consummate filmmaker who has consistently sought out the finest actors, writers, editors and cinematographers in Japan, Ichikawa has created a considerable body of work, from the early anti-war classic *The Burmese Harp* through a number of perverse, ironic comedies on social and sexual mores, down to his most recent works, a series of detective thrillers, beginning with *The Inugami Family*. Though these last have been in Japan the most commercially successful made-in-Japan movies ever, they have not found American distributors (*Queen Bee*, however, the fourth in the series, will be shown in the Japanese Spectrum series at the Bleecker St. Cinema next Tuesday). For all their wryness, Ichikawa's films always have a wonderful sense of humanity about them. His 1964 *Tokyo Olympiad* was, in fact, sent back to the cutting room by the producers with the admonition, "more sports, less people," thus virtually wrecking what those who have seen the original say was one of the great documentaries of all time.

But more than anything, Ichikawa is one of the great visual geniuses in the history of cinema. Having trained as an illustrator and an animator early in his career, he

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always considers the *look* of a film of paramount importance (as do directors such as Bertolucci, Antonioni, Fassbinder and Visconti), or at least of equal importance to the scripts (most of which have been co-authored by Ichikawa and his wife Natto Wada).

While most directors (and cinematographers) even today seem to have sort of stumbled into the use of widescreen visuals by default (or because their studios told them to), in this film in 1963 Ichikawa was consistently using the *whole* screen for pictorial and dramatic effect. And he was doing it with astonishing simplicity, offering not predictable travelog panoramas or wraparound production-number extravaganzas, but a bold use of the long frame itself to create tension, mood and an enveloping intensity that can be as actually and viscerally involving as the Cinerama rollercoaster rides of yesteryear.

Ichikawa achieves this with a deliberate formalism that is never cheap or gimmicky. He makes his statement, as it were, with the simplest of brushstrokes, and the clean, spare blankness of the rest of the canvas makes that stroke all the more important — so much so that the mere look of scene after scene (an artificial snowstorm, a lonely figure in a large wheat field, a swordfight in the dark) is enough to send shivers down your spine.

An Actor's Revenge tells the rather simple story of a Kabuki female impersonator who plots a clever revenge against the business associates who drove his parents to suicide. The Kabuki theatrical tradition from which the protagonist comes seems to have seeped into and taken over the very form and substance of the film. Everything about the film is colored and shaded by that tradition — its formalism, its concise patterning, the highly stylized tone of the sets and lighting (not just in the theater, but in the "real" world as well) and even the stylishly cool and sentimental characterization of the actor. That erosion of reality (and, by implication, cinema as the mirror of reality) by theater and theatricality (Kabuki having been the whole life obsession of the main character since early childhood) is the most wonderfully perverse conceit of all. The kinkiness of the concept pervades the entire mood of the film (much as it does in another Ichikawa work of the same period, *Odd Obsession*, in which an old man tries to cure his own impotence by forcing a young doctor to seduce his wife) — making for an exceptional, if unsettling, gut-level experience.

The fact that the actor is, moreover, a female impersonator is of importance to Ichikawa's overall statement, though this has been downplayed by some adherents of the film who insist that being a female impersonator in the Kabuki tradition has no relationship whatsoever to doing drag in the West. That denial of correspondences is poppycock, because the similarities of the transvestism in the two cultures far outweigh the differences. Moreover, the character Yokinojo doesn't just appear in drag onstage, he lives as a woman and in women's clothes full-time, in every scene in the film. Among the most affecting scenes, in fact, are the irony-laden sequences where he, as part of his revenge plot, flirts with the young wife of one of his old enemies. Yokinojo's whole character is a carefully contrived womanliness *at all times*. The act is always homage, never ridicule or insult, to the object of identification. But his own emotions — including the "manly" rage for revenge — are always kept carefully bottled up behind the face of the woman he not only plays onstage, but in essence has become.

Ichikawa masterfully uses all this to explore various disturbing dichotomies in the film: masculinity vs. femininity, role-playing vs. "real life," theater vs. cinema. The actor who so perfectly plays Yokinojo (Kazuo Hasegawa) also plays the very butch — but somehow sensible and sensitive — Yamitaro, a peasant and part-time burglar who may even be a little in love with Yokinojo. This only layers the whole thing even further.

No easy answers should be drawn from any of this, but the images are firm and secure. It is proof positive of Kon Ichikawa's genius that they are as rich in elusive irony as they are visually stunning. ●

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Village Voice, September 3, 1979

More slippery than "Soap": Hasegawa in Ichikawa's tour de force

Vengeance, Kinky-Kabuki Style

By J. Hoberman

AN ACTOR'S REVENGE. Directed by Kon Ichikawa. Written by Natto Wada after the original story by Otokichi Mikami and based on a former script by Ito Daisuke and Tennosuke Kinugasa. At the Public Theater through September 2.

FILM

Visiting Japan without knowing the language, Roland Barthes found it a world of pure style, an "empire of signifiers" empty of meaning. Barthes might enjoy a similar disorientation in surveying the oeuvre of Kon Ichikawa, the veteran Japanese director whose 1963 classic, *An Actor's Revenge,* is now playing its first extended run in New York. "Disconcertingly versatile," one critic tagged the 64-year-old Ichikawa who since 1946 has directed 57 features—for Americans a barely explored continent in the a-Western world of Japanese film—and said "I don't have a unifying theme. I just make any picture I like or that the company tells me to." The fact that Ichikawa cites Walt Disney as his major influence and Agatha Christie as his idol ("I can't understand why she wasn't given the Nobel Prize") does not make it any easier to put him in a clear cultural context.

Trained as an animator Ichikawa broke into live-action as the director of tawdry melodramas and first achieved prominence for his humorous depictions of the postwar plight of the average Japanese. In the U.S., he is known for his documentary of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and a pair of extremely dark comedies— *Odd Obsession* and *Fires on the Plain* (both 1959)—dealing respectively with murder through induced erotomania and wartime cannibalism. *An Actor's Revenge* is a lighter, more rarefied exercise in kink and a formal experiment apparently unique among his works.

Exploiting color and Cinemascope with tremendous verve, the film scrambles a score of related Eastern/Western popular traditions from Kabuki and Jacobean tragedy to samurai flicks and comic strips. The mildewed plot, laced with campy explosions of swordplay and violent, flashy montages, concerns the vengeance exacted by a Kabuki star, Yukinojo, upon the three men responsible for his parents' deaths. Yukinojo is played by Kazuo Hasegawa, the grand old he-man of Japanese cinema, and the film is very much his vehicle. However, one never knows whether Hasegawa is up in the driver's seat or being taken for a ride. The actor is almost never off-screen, as he also plays the secondary role of a Robin Hood-like thief: this insouciant if paunchy swashbuckler is in total contrast to Yukinojo. For Yukinojo is an *oyama* (Kabuki female impersonator) and though recognized as male, follows the 18th-century custom of maintaining his demure feminine persona even offstage.

Ichikawa externalizes this Playhouse-of-the-Ridculous confusion by heightening the built-in artifice—casually juxtaposing stylized black backgrounds, painted scenery, and naturalistic sets throughout the film. With its instant spotlights and rolling fog-machines, *An Actor's Revenge* is as blatantly theatrical as Rohmer's *Perceval,* with a running string of visual jokes and distancing gags that recall the films of Frank Tashlin (another animator turned director): Yukinojo emotes upon an impossibly vast stage; shadows are independent of the bodies that cast them; characters leap over cardboard fences and land in "real" gardens. As befits such continual, off-handed reality hopping, the musical score is an astonishing mishmosh, oscillating between schmaltzy strings, koto clanging, and Mancini-like cocktail jazz.

Not much in this swirl of subterfuge is ever what it seems. Yukinojo flutters about, his sword concealed in a fan, tricking each of his enemies into hornswoggling the others. His plan hinges upon the seduction of one of their daughters and the love scenes played out between this scheming, middle-aged matinee idol always in drag and a smitten young courtesan are more truly bizarre than anything I've ever seen in our own national Kabuki, *Soap.* To further enrich the film's deadpan perversity, Ichikawa introduces a voyeuristic angle. Yukinojo's macho double, Yamitaro, as well as a man-hating female burglar who also falls for Yukinojo, continually spy upon the *oyama's* exploits. "An actor's revenge is always a surprise," Yamitaro comments as he climbs down from the eaves having witnessed Yukinojo impersonate his own mother and frighten one of the villains to death. That's the least one can say for Ichikawa's snazzy tour-de-force—at once a sophisticated jape and, with its confluence of illusionism, ritual dress-up, and revenge, a resonant evocation of primal theater.

Supposedly Ichikawa's studio foisted this impossibly hokey script, already filmed in 1938, upon him as punishment for directing an expensive fiasco about anti-Korean racism in Japan. He then demanded Hasegawa, the Charles Boyer of Japanese cinema, as his star and proceeded to play ping-pong with the proscenium arch. But the film's history is even more complex. *An Actor's Revenge* also celebrates Hasegawa's 300th film appearance, and he is actually recreating the double role he played in the original. This first version, evidently lost, was directed by Tennosuke Kinugasa, an experimental filmmaker during the 1920s and himself a former *oyama.* Thus, the cultural cross-references embedded in *An Actor's Revenge* are no less tricky than Ichikawa's mise-en-scene and just as baffling as his intentions. To further complicate the situation, the film bombed in Japan, only to be hailed as a masterpiece in Britain and France.

An Actor's Revenge seems to have been a brilliant detour in Ichikawa's idosyncratic career. He next turned to *Tokyo Olympiad,* then to the Italian-made puppet animation, *Toppo Gigio and the Missile War.* Recently, his 1976 detective comedy-thriller, *The Inugami Family,* was the biggest box-office success in Japanese film history, and he has made three sequels since. The latest, *Queen Bee* (1978), will receive its New York premier as part of the Bleecker Street's "Japanese Spectrum" series on September 11. ■

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