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YOJIMBO *Seneca International, Ltd.; producer, Toho Co., Ltd., in association with Kurosawa Productions; director, Akira Kurosawa; screenplay, Ryuzo Kikushima, Akira Kurosawa; music, Masaru Sato; photography, Kazuo Miyagawa; with Toshiro Mifune, Eijiro Tono, Seizaburo Kawazu, Hiroshi Tachikawa*

Into a Japanese village one dusty 19th Century day strides a deadeye samurai, sword for hire. We know he is in the right place when a dog scuttles by with a human hand in its teeth. Sanjuro, the good samurai, has stumbled on a sellers' market and he wastes no time in displaying the goods he has for sale.

The mobsters who dominate the town have split into two warring factions, at odds over which outfit should operate the gambling concession at the local silk fair. The gangs are headquartered at opposite ends of the main street. Sanjuro routs out both sides to give a display in swinging swordsmanship. He insults some hired toughs on one team. They take it amiss and charge him. In a flash, snickersnack, blood gushes, the air is full of severed arms and legs and the screams and death rattles of assorted villains.

Sanjuro is instantly the most popular man in town, courted by both sides for his services, until one day a younger brother of one of the gang lords comes home from the big city. What has little Nosuke to show for his travels but a pistol, the first ever seen in those parts. Nosuke shoots up the main street, just as a brag, and Sanjuro worries. The town would be better off with both gangs out of action, he figures, and the best thing to do is to continue playing both ends against the middle. While ostensibly in the employ of one gang, he kills 16 co-toughs in 30 seconds, releases a captive concubine and blames the carnage on the rival outfit.

In the final frames Sanjuro thrusts his snickersnee into his belt, wishes luck all round and literally lopes out of camera range, headed West.

In "Yojimbo," Akira Kurosawa has for the first time created a really marketable film for American consumption on all levels. To employ all the current clichés, it is an exotic adult Western. And the heroic samurai, superbly played by Toshiro Mifune, is the Oriental image of the straight-shooting, softhearted and virginal roughrider of the Western plains. The entire production is first-rate and handsomely abetted by a gripping and effective musical score. "Yojimbo" turns out to be, in every aspect, the emotional cathartic a good Western morality play ought to be.

There are those who are apparently obliged to make of Kurosawa's total product a dry and exclusive intellectual exercise. But whatever private interpretations are imposed on "Yojimbo," it is, above all, a superbly made and highly entertaining motion picture.