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'Actor's Revenge' by Ichikawa

BY KEVIN THOMAS
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Fifteen years ago, the Kokusai Theater, then the local showcase for the now-defunct Dai-ichi Films, briefly ran Kon Ichikawa's bizarre and bravura "An Actor's Revenge." The film went on to international acclaim but never resurfaced locally until now. It is currently at the Picfair, along with a revival of Nagisa Oshima's "The Ceremony."

Legend has it that Dai-ichi, as punishment for some flops, forced the director of such masterworks as "Conflagration" and "The Burmese Harp" to remake what was a creaky old vehicle first filmed in the 1920s. Instead of protesting, Ichikawa, with his scenarist wife Natto Wada, decided it would be a chance "to see what movies can do."

What Ichikawa has accomplished with "An Actor's Revenge," known also as "The Revenge of Yukinojo" and "The Revenge of a Kabuki Actor," remains just as astonishing as when it was first seen in 1963. In essence, Ichikawa has taken a typical revenge plot, one aptly compared to those of the Jacobean dramatists, and created a stylistic triumph.

The film elicits a pathos that goes beyond the campiness of its unlikely hero, a female impersonator who wears drag offstage as well as on. For this role, Ichikawa cast none other than Kazuo Hasegawa, veteran matinee idol who starred in Kinugasa's "Gate of Hell." To be sure, Hasegawa, whose 300th film this was, plays a second role, that of a virile Robin Hood.

trigue, which peripherally involves that Robin Hood character, who's friendly to Yukinojo in a comic subplot. Visually, "An Actor's Revenge" is a tour de force, with dazzling swordplay and an atmosphere as exotic as that of a Sternberg film. Yet none of these effects is merely showing off, serving rather to illuminate—exalt, even—Yukinojo's increasingly tragic dilemma as he finds himself growing genuinely attached to the innocent girl he must exploit to carry out his vengeance.

While Ichikawa is much concerned with the futility of vengeance, he is even more involved with the isolation of Yukinojo, an isolation that began long before his vengeance is set in motion and is only heightened by it.

With Ichikawa's characteristic streak of dark humor, "An Actor's Revenge" borders on the outrageous, but in a

demonstration of his mastery of tone, Ichikawa never quite goes too far. From Hasegawa he has gotten an astoundingly selfless performance as Yukinojo—all falsetto and miming steps, drawing a tiny dagger to defend himself with delicacy (and breathtaking dispatch).

"An Actor's Revenge" (Times-rated: Mature) has been ranked with Renoir's "The Golden Coach" and Carne's "Children of Paradise" as one of the cinema's "great meditations on life and theater." This may be reaching a bit—and taking the picture far too seriously—but it is undeniably a stunner. With his current spate of detective movies, all derived from a series of delirious old novels, Kon Ichikawa continues to redeem his material.

'AN ACTOR'S REVENGE' (Yukinojo Hengei')

A Dai-ichi presentation. Producer Masachichi Nagata. Director Kon Ichikawa. Screenplay Natto Wada, based on an original story by Otokichi Mikami and adapted from scripts by Daisuke Ito and Tetsunosuke Kinugasa. Camera Kazuo Miyagawa. Art director Yoshio Nishioaka. Music Yasushi Akutagawa. Featuring Kazuo Hasegawa, Ayako Wakao, Fujiko Yamamoto, Raizo Ichikawa, Shin-iro Katsu. In Japanese with English subtitles.
Running time: 1 hr. 54 min.
Times-rated: Mature.

When Yukinojo at last arrives in Edo as the star of a troupe with which he has been performing since the age of 12, he is reminded by his master that he must avenge his dead parents, who were ruined by three greedy men now prominent in the old capital. Their ringleader (Ganjirō Nakamura), in fact, attends on opening night with his beautiful daughter (Ayako Wakao), who falls in love with Yukinojo at first sight.

What ensues involves much typically convoluted in-