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KUROSAWA

Born in Toyko in 1910. After retiring from the army, his father became a PE teacher. Kurosawa showed little interest in his studies until he discovered painting. He attended the school of Fine Arts in Doshusha and, encouraged by the success of his first exhibits, decided to go on studying painting. However, his family's financial difficulties forced him to drop out of school and to use his talent to illustrate cooking recipies. Trying to escape the mediocrity of his life, he took the entrance examination for the Photo Chemical Lab (affiliated with the Toho) and wrote about the shortcomings of Japanese cinema. He was admitted as a student director to Kajiro Yamamoto. He distinguished himself very quickly and replaced Yamamoto to make The Horse in 1941. He made his feature film, Judo Saga, in 1943.

THRONE OF BLOOD AND RED BEARD

THRONE OF BLOOD is an adaption of Shakespeare's play "Macbeth". The action takes place during the civil wars...Returning from a victorious campaign, Taketoki Washizu, commander of Fort Number One, and Yoshiaki Miki, commander of Fort Number Two, and two generals of Kuniharu Tsuzuki, the master of the "Castle of the Spider's Web", meet an old sorceress in a dark forest during a storm. She predicts that Taketori will be commander of the Castle of the North, the master of the Castle of the Spiders, that Yoshiaki will be commander of Fort Number One and that his son will succeed Taketori on the throne. That same evening, master Kuniharu names Taketori commander of the Northern Castle and Yoshiaki commander of Fort Number One. Haunted by the prophecy, which has already been partly fulfilled, but also pressured by his wife, the diabolical Asaji, Taketoki kills Kuniharu in order to take possession of the throne. Then, still under Asaji's influence, Taketoki decides to kill his best friend Yoshiaki as well as his son Yoshiteru, but the latter succeeds in escaping. Pursued by the ghost of Yoshiaki, who appears to him during a banquet, and overcome with remorse, Taketoki goes to consult the old sorceress. She tells him that he will not be defeated until the day when the Forest of the Spider's Hand advances to attack the castle. However, Asaji, who has become mad after giving birth to a stillborn child, tries in vain to remove from her hands an imaginary spot of blood. The army of Noriyasu Odagura and Yoshiteru Miki, with Kunimaru, Kuniharu's son, at its head, prepares to attack Taketoki. In passing through the Forest of the Spider's Hand, the soldiers cut branches and begin to march toward the castle behind this curtain of foliage. Taketoki sees the forest advancing toward his castle. He will be killed by enemy arrows.

Kurosawa says of THRONE OF BLOOD, "With this film, THE LOWER DEPTHS and THE HIDDEN FORTRESS, I seem to have made a jidai-geki trilogy." (Almost all Japanese, and Kurosawa is no exception, think of films as being divided into period pictures--jidai-geki, and modern-story pictures--gendai-mono, as though these were the only two alternatives. The West has something like this in its attitudes toward Westerns and the crime film.) "I have long thought that the Japanese jidai picture is very often historically uninformed, and beyond this has never really availed itself of modern film-making techniques. In SEVEN SAMURAI we tried to do something about that, and THRONE OF BLOOD had the same general feeling behind it.

"Originally I had wanted to produce this film and let a younger director direct it. But when the script was finished and Toho saw how expensive it would be, they asked me to direct it. So I did -- my contract expired after these three films.

I also had another idea about the film, and that was simply that I wanted to make MACBETH. (Kurosawa had seen none of the other film versions, though

much later he saw that of Orsen Welles on television). "The problem was: how to adapt the story to Japanese thinking. The story is understandable enough, but the Japanese tend to think differently about such things as witches and ghosts." (Though ghosts tend to be vengeful, as in the innumerable kaidan films, the idea of a gratuitously malevolent trio of witches is far from the Japanese imagination.) "I decided upon the techniques of the Noh, because in Noh, style and story are one. I wanted to use the way Noh actors have of moving their bodies, the way they have of walking, and the general composition that the Noh stage provides." (In the film the most successful examples of this are usually associated with "Macbeth's" wife, who uses slightly accelerated Noh movements, and the scene where she tries to wash her hands clean is pure Noh; also the asymmetrical composition of Noh is much seen, particularly in the long conversation scenes between Macbeth and his wife before the first murder. The appearance of Banquo's ghost, on the other hand, uses very little Noh technique.)

"This is one of the reasons why there are so very few close-ups in the picture. I tried to show everything using the full-shot. Japanese almost never make films in this way, and I remember I confused my staff thoroughly with my instructions. They were so used to moving up for moments of emotion, and I told them to move further back. In this way I suppose you could call the film experimental."

"It was a very hard film to make. We decided that the main castle set had to be built on the slopes of Mount Fuji, not because I wanted to show this mountain, but because it has precisely the stunted landscape that I wanted. And it is usually foggy. I had decided I wanted lots of fog for this film." (Kurosawa has said that since he was very young the idea of samurai galloping out of the fog much appealed to him. At the beginning of the original version of this film, Mifune and Minoru gallop in and out of the fog eight times.) "Also I wanted a low, squat castle. Kohei Ezaki, who was the art director, wanted a towering castle, but I had my way. Making the set was very difficult because we didn't have enough people and the location was so far from Tokyo. Fortunately, there was a U.S. Marine Corps base near by and they helped a great deal; also a whole MP battalion helped us out. We all worked very hard; indeed, clearing the ground building the set. Our labor on this steep fog-bound slope, I remember, absolutely exhausted us -- we almost got sick."

REDBEARD is an adaption of the novel THE HISTORY OF REDBEARD'S CLINIC, by Shu-goro Yamamoto.

After three years of medical studies in Nagasaki, the great medical center during the Edo epoch, the young Noboru Yasumoto returns to Edo (ancient Tokyo), dreaming of his brilliant career. But he is unfortunately given a position in a poor clinic in Koishikawa. Here the head doctor, Redbeard, a strong, intelligent, benevolent man, serves the needy people of the quarter. Yasumoto, at first annoyed, is little by little attracted by Redbeard's character and activities. In the clinic he meets many "insulted and injured" people: a beautiful, obsessed madwoman, old Rokusuke, dying abandoned, his daughter Oluni whom misery has forced to kill her husband, the brave carpenter Sahachi, who admits before he dies to his sad story of love with Onaka... This does not fail to move the young intern and gives him a glimpse of life's truths. One day, Redbeard and Yasumoto save Otovo, a sixteen year old prostitute, and the master puts Yasumoto in charge of her. He also saves the family of a young thief from a collective suicide. Yasumoto's marriage is arranged with Masae, the daughter of a samurai of high class, and then is called by the government to the position of chief doctor of which he had always dreamed. But he is no longer interested in riches or glory and decides to stay on at the poor clinic in order to follow the path paved by Redbeard. Asked what Redbeard meant to him, if his activity is interpreted as a sort of engagement, Kurosawa stated: "It's a dream. It is therefore a dream that one would like to become real. If a man like Redbeard really existed, if one of his disciples followed the path he opened, if these men of goodwill became more numerous, our world would be changed. It would be the beginning of a time of joy and happiness. REDBEARD is a sad story, a somber tale, but I wish the spectators could leave happier and full of hope. Before shooting the film, I had my whole crew listen to the chorus of the IXth Symphony and told them that that was the mood of the film."

The Redbeard's life has its positive and its negative sides, but it is entirely devoted to the fight for justice. "It is depressing to be living in our society. Everything is subject to change. One can't help dream of a better life. Yet things must change...don't you think? Look at those young people today. Their whole ideal is to make love as well as possible. Look at the cinema. The only thing they are shooting is that trash with eroticism and the "yakuza". It pays! Look at politics. See how our leaders are behaving! They are corrupt. And one can't even criticize them openly for obvious political reasons, except by using an historical film... Redbeard is the model of the saviour. He is an imaginary character, but in creating him, I have illustrated the ideal of a man of goodwill. Even if our government were to change, I really doubt that people can be happy."

A.D.

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Kurosawa doesn't like to talk about the technical aspect of his films, but we can get some idea of his approach from a number of comments made during his interviews with D. Ritchie and Les Cahiers du Cinéma.

His scripts are usually the result of a joint effort with three or four of his closest collaborators. One reason for writing the scenario in common is to achieve a greater objectivity. He likes to work with strong scenarios but doesn't hesitate to improvise whenever necessary. In Redbeard, for example, the sequence where Redbeard enters the brothel with his disciple Yasumoto: during the shooting there was a sudden dust storm; he kept it because it creates a strange effect--it was raining in the previous sequence--and because it accentuated the sinister atmosphere of the desolate and dusty square. He does prepare his decoupage very carefully and usually makes drawings for every shot, although now that he is able to shoot simultaneously with three cameras, it has become a very complicated process. He likes to begin his films with a sudden and dramatic fade in order to establish immediately that he has a story to tell. He likes to tell a story with lots of action and considers that this is one of his strongest points. His subjects alternate from historical subjects (he likes the period of the civil wars) to contemporary stories. He likes battle scenes in particular, and as he puts it, "battles and samurai, that's my thing!" He doesn't use color (except for one shot in Heaven and Hell) because he hasn't found yet a color that satisfies him, a truly "Japanese" color which unlike the color of Gates of Hell, should be dark and opaque. He first decided to use several cameras simultaneously to shoot action scenes that were dangerous and could not be repeated in Seven Samurai. He found the results very satisfactory and also found out that actors tended to forget themselves more easily when performing in front of several cameras. This of course, creates some problems with lighting, but does give him a greater versatility for editing his films. He also uses telephoto lenses for similar reasons, and he eliminates the sense of distance and perspective in order to give the image an intensity and a immediacy which is almost hallucinating. "Most directors have their settings built larger than in reality in order to have more space. I have things built exactly as they are. When a shot is taken with a wide angle lens things appear bigger and distorted. To avoid that, I use telephoto lenses." He shoots most of his films in studio because, first of all, it gives a better illusion of reality and also because he finds it simpler and more economical. His films are almost entirely post-synchronized, and in his use of sound effects, he has been very influenced by the Noh. He has also tried to reproduce cinematically the very expressive language of the Noh and to mold his sound editing to the gestures and movements of the actors. Kurosawa is very concerned with maintaining the continuity of the action and often uses single-shot sequences. "In the single-shot sequences of my films, the camera is always subordinated to the action, the movements of the characters. In Mizoguchi's films, the actors are still, the camera moves for them. It is a way to animate a static composition which can become very monotonous...Myself, I want to stick to the action of the film, make the spectator forget the camera. It seems to me, that one must have the camera movement coincide

exactly with that of the object. It's delicate because there is a lot of action in my films. The presence of the camera would affect the verisimilitude of the story..." Kurosawa is extremely critical of the big monopolistic and bureaucratic producers like the Tôhō and accuses them of having destroyed Japanese cinema. His two favorite directors are John Ford and Jean Renoir.

B.A.

italics: Prepared by Anne Dorfman and members of the Comparative Literature Film Forum. Most of the material is based on two interviews with Donald Ritchie in Sight and Sound in 1964, and Les Cahiers du Cinema, no. 182, September, 1966.