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Entertainment

'Ran' Will Be Crowning Achievement: Kurosawa

By TODD R. EASTHAM

MT. FUJI (UPI) — Akira Kurosawa, himself the undisputed king of Japanese filmmakers, is at work on a samurai adaptation of Shakespeare's "King Lear" — the epic tragedy he believes will be the crowning achievement of a long career.

A lavish production with a budget of \$11.5 million, a cast of thousands and elaborate sets on locations across the country, "Ran" (Chaos) will be the most expensive Japanese film ever made.

The legendary director of such films as "The Seven Samurai," "Rashomon" and "The Throne of Blood" said he didn't know whether "Ran" would succeed in capturing the elusive spirit of cinema, but "it will be closer than all my previous films."

"It is my life's work," said Kurosawa, who has called his widely acclaimed film — "Kagemusha" (The Shadow Samurai) — a dry run for his current film.

"Ran," which the 74-year-old director has waited years to make, was influenced both by Lear and a Japanese historical tale about a samurai lord with three warlike sons who destroy themselves and their father's realm in a hellish battle of succession.

Like Shakespeare's tragic king, the great lord Hidetora Ichimonji (Tatsuya Nakadai), decides to divide his realm among his sons — although with Lear it was three daughters. The plan is opposed by his youngest son, Saburo, who pays for his candor with disinheritance.

The two older sons, Taro and Jiro, first combine forces to wrest the last vestiges of authority from their father and then destroy his court, his kingdom and each other in mounting waves of ruthless violence.

Like Lear, the old warrior goes mad and wanders about the country accompanied by his jester, whose wry observations — "if a madman goes

mad again, will he become sane?" — are reminiscent of the sad paradoxes posed by Shakespeare's fool.

Kurosawa spoke about "Ran" and his philosophy of film-making in a rare interview on location on the lower slopes of majestic Mt. Fuji.

"I've been making movies for 50 years and I haven't discovered the true spirit of cinema — but I'm getting closer," he said between takes of a battle sequence being filmed around a castle he built at the foot of the snowclad mountain.

The true spirit of cinema is present "when you feel a chill in your spine," said Kurosawa, adding that he has succeeded in invoking that spirit occasionally in past films, but never in sustaining it through an entire film.

Asked why he chose the slopes of Japan's sacred mountain for his final location shots even though he will not use the mountain itself in the film, he referred to the power of nature to influence his art:

"You always encounter something strange when you come to this mountain. Two days ago it rained heavily and the rain had penetrated the soil. The following day was unusually warm and the black volcanic soil was steaming.

"I'm really only happy (with a location shot) when something unexpected happens, some accident or quirk of nature," he said.

The veteran director spent some 10 years looking for a backer for the film, but because the script calls for several large-scale action sequences the conservative Japanese film establishment considered the project too costly and extravagant to take on.

Help eventually came from France in the form of producer Serge Silberman, another veteran filmmaker who has worked with such luminaries as the late Luis Bunuel. Silberman put together an international group of backers and enlisted the aid of Katsumi Fur-

ukawa of Nippon Herald Films, as co-producer.

Kurosawa conceded that the expensive battle scenes are not essential but rather help to create a richer and more complete film experience.

"The true spirit of cinema is to go everywhere," he commented. "These scenes are not absolutely necessary to the film, but I feel that to be true to the spirit of the cinema we should film them."

In the scene being shot at the time of the interview, which Kurosawa described as the "Beginning of the hell sequence," Hidetora is trapped in the upper chamber of a castle under siege by the armies of his two sons.

Black smoke rises from the ruins of the castle's outer defenses and the bloodied corpses — actually carefully constructed dummies splashed with blood-red paint — of the old lord's retainers lie about the grounds as the son's horse-mounted samurai encircle the mountain fortress.

"I'm trying to express the feeling of the father in the upper room of the castle," Kurosawa said. "The movements of the troops express the turmoil in his mind."

"He is contemplating seppuku (ritual suicide) but cannot find a knife to do it with — so he goes mad."

The script, written by Kurosawa in collaboration with Hideo Oguni and Masato Ide, describes the ensuing sequence as "A terrible scroll of hell . . . a daytime nightmare . . . the way of the demonic Ashura, as seen by a Buddha in tears."

Originally trained as a visual artist, Kurosawa designed the sets, costumes and make-up for "Ran" himself and personally oversees the filming of both dramatic and action sequences.

Silberman said the film will premiere on the eve of the Tokyo international film festival in June. He said he also hopes to show the film at next year's Cannes film festival.