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FILM FORUM 2002

# KUROSAWA & MIFUNE

"The greatest actor-director team in film history!"—David Shipman

If to latter-day movie lovers around the world Toshiro Mifune remains the lone warrior slashing his way to glory, and Akira Kurosawa the director of sweeping historical spectacles, that's only the base of the pedestal. Mifune (1920-1997) was of course the John Wayne of Japan, not to mention the prototype for Clint Eastwood, but in the way he revolutionized screen acting in the postwar period with his lightning speed, emotional nakedness, and legendary intensity, he was also Marlon Brando; in the way he easily encompassed titanic, complex, classical roles, he was Laurence Olivier. ("My God, what a presence! If he could act in English he'd conquer the world" - Charlton Heston) His range was seemingly limitless: a cocky gangster in a Hawaiian shirt; a righteous, straight arrow cop; a smelly, horny thief; a self-hating samurai wannabe; a reluctant, hen-pecked murderer; a loyal-unto-death warlord; a colorless salaryman in horn-rims; a cynical ronin bum. And of course nobody did samurai like Kurosawa (1910-1998); but period films comprised only half his oeuvre, which easily assimilated Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Maxim Gorky, and Ed McBain. The complete auteur, he manifested a technical command and formal innovation throughout; and, in addition to the classic jidai-geki (period films), made masterpieces of the detective film, the most intimate of family dramas, and the prototype of Star Wars. So to pigeonhole him as "king of the samurai epics" is to call Shakespeare a scripter, Beethoven a piano player, and Rembrandt a portrait painter. And Kurosawa and Mifune together? Solti playing Beethoven, Gielgud playing Shakespeare, Rembrandt painting ... Rembrandt? Otanoshimi!

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The films in this series are distributed by Cowboy Pictures in association with Janus Films.

ALL FILMS ARE IN JAPANESE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES.

New translations and subtitles by Linda Hoaglund on Throne of Blood, I Live in Fear, Stray Dog, Drunken Angel, The Bad Sleep Well and Seven Samurai.

## THRONE OF BLOOD

(1957) ...or Castle of the Spider's Web, the literal translation of the Japanese title above. Macbeth transformed into a medieval Japanese legend, as General Mifune, with Minoru (the woodchopping samurai) Chiaki's "Banquo" at his side, gallops through a seemingly endless forest to his encounter with a single witch, then, as a dense fog lifts - within the shot - finds himself before a looming castle. With the legendary Isuzu Yamada (six marriages, 50 years a star) as his Lady, this is a partnership of titans. ("Now that's real acting!" remarked Mifune while years later watching a clip of Yamada in action.) Mifune's takeover after the murder, and the castle's bird invasion are powerful and fascinating additions to the text in this heavily Noh-influenced

adaptation: chanting chorus, trilling flute, the endlessly spinning witch dubbed by an actor. How-they-do-it department: except for the final hit, there is no camera trickery in the famous final scene. Real archers fired real arrows from just off camera. "Who wouldn't be scared?" remarked Mifune when complimented on his acting of terror.

I LIVE IN FEAR

(1955) "I'm not afraid of death - I just do not want to be killed!" Dentist Takashi Shimura, a volunteer at Family Court, sits in at a tough case: just after the Bikini H-bomb test, a 70ish factory owner (played by a latex-free 35-year-old Mifune-arguably his greatest performance and a transformation so complete that hardened buffs fail to recognize him) becomes obsessed with a neurotic fear of the Bomb and desperately tries to persuade his extended family - including mistress and love child - to move to the supposed safety of Brazil. Every device at Kurosawa's command is enlisted to enforce the mood of oppression, of unease - sweaty faces, endlessly fluttering fans, books flicked open by a hot wind, distant thunder - or was it a plane? - with a desperate Mifune shockingly kneeling before his family to implore their agreement (a speech equaling his legendary Seven Samurai monologue). The final effect is overwhelming, and perhaps Kurosawa's most sweeping statement on the human condition.

STRAY DOG

(1949) Kurosawa Noir: While a rubble-strewn Tokyo swelters through a torrid heat wave, awkward young white-suited detective Mifune finds to his shame that his pistol has been stolen - and then that it's been used in a murder. Thus begins his obsessive, guilt-ridden search, highlighted by a nearly ten-minute dialogue-less sequence shot by hidden camera in the toughest black market section of the city. (The post-production dubbing, with twelve of the latest pop songs layered in, was so difficult that Kurosawa's soundman was reduced to tears.) No bleeding hearts here: when seasoned mentor Takashi Shimura points out that the killer, a returned vet, went bad when all his possessions were stolen, Mifune heatedly replies that the same thing happened to him - and then he became a cop. No surprise then that, as the chase progresses toward a final confrontation - electrifyingly backgrounded by a young girl's stop-start practicing of a Mozart piece - Mifune and the unseen killer begin to seem more and more alike. A confessed admirer of Georges Simenon, Kurosawa adapted his own unpublished novel for this, his first detective film (the second is *High and Low*, showing August 11-13) and the real beginning of the genre in Japan.

DRUNKEN ANGEL

(1948) In his slum clinic nestled next to a festering sump, ruined-by-booze sawbones Takashi Shimura casually scissors open the wound of his latest patient, greasily-coiffed yakuza Toshiro Mifune - but does Mifune also have tuberculosis? Obviously not a good affliction for the business he's in - especially when it turns out the Big Boss is back after all, and ready to reclaim his gang and moll. This tortured, Dostoyevskyan encounter amid postwar ruins was the beginning of the legendary Kurosawa-Mifune collaboration. Said Kurosawa later: "Shimura played the doctor beautifully, but I found that I couldn't control Mifune. When I saw this I let him play the part freely. I didn't want to smother that vitality." - a vitality that encompassed his throttling Shimura,

frenetically dancing to "The Jungle Boogie," and going toe to toe in a white-paint-strewn final showdown. Kurosawa: "In this picture I finally discovered myself. It was my picture: I was doing it and no one else." Not seen here until 1960, this was Kurosawa's first Kinema Jumpo 'Best One' award winner (Japan's Oscar equivalent), highlighted by Mifune's wheezing reel through the neighborhood in counterpoint to the "Cuckoo Waltz."

RASHOMON
(1950) Fugitives from a ruined city huddling under a gigantic gate during a massive downpour; a brutal crime in a sun-splashed forest, the camera panning right into the sun; a tragicomic duel fought in eerie counterpart to a bolero: rape and murder in 12th century Kyoto, as seen by four conflicting witnesses. Adapted from two stories by the great Ryunosuke Akutagawa, this is the picture whose acclaim (Venice Grand Prize, Best Foreign Film Oscar) vaulted an already-great-but-internationally-unknown director and national cinema to world prominence (and added "Rashomon-type story" to the vocabulary). Machiko Kyo's performance would eventually land her a LIFE magazine cover, while, as the bandit, Mifune takes acting chances only the greatest dare, going beyond overacting into something so outrageous it could only be real. At first thought relevant only to the Japanese - the ruins of old-time Kyoto seen as a metaphor for post-war Japan - Rashomon is now universally considered the great filmic statement on the unknowability of truth, of how each person sees things in their own way. Seldom has any one film had more impact on the world's perceptions.

HIGH AND LOW
(1963) Up-from-the-shop-floor shoe company exec Mifune is in the midst of a mortgage-everything takeover battle when the phone rings with a giant ransom demand for his son - but then in walks... Adapted from Ed McBain's 87th Precinct novel King's Ransom, this is the ultimate kidnap movie, with Kurosawa at the peak of his filmmaking powers: moral battles rage in a first hour almost totally confined to a single room jammed with distraught family, cynical advisers, and recorder-wielding cops led by Steve-McQueen-cool Tatsuya Nakadai; the de rigeur money transfer takes place aboard the Shinkansen (bullet train) with cameras bolted to the floor; the police conferences are shot in deep focus with dozens of sweaty white-shirted cops brainstorming; undercover detectives spectate at a near-invisible drug pass in a jammed dance hall; and the jailhouse interview punctuated by the heaviest steel door closing in film history. "Undoubtedly the most complex detective film of all... It contains so many nuances of narrative, photographic technique, and acting, that it demands seeing far more than once." - William K. Everson.

THE BAD SLEEP WELL
(1960) Scandal-scenting reporters act as a chorus while they lurk at the edge of the festivities, as the echt-Japanese wedding reception for bespectacled pencil-pushing executive secretary Mifune and limping boss's daughter Kiyoko Kagawa moves from testimonials schmaltzy to scathing (Bride's brother: treat her right or "I'll kill you"), even as cops wait in the wings and in wheels a cake shaped like an office building, a single rose marking a notorious suicide - or was it murder? - site. And that's just the

first 20 minutes! Roughly Enron Meets Hamlet, Kurosawa's first independent production charts scandal and ruin moving inexorably up the corporate ladder as squirming execs debate whom to throw to the wolves next, even as they realize there's an internal mole bent on revenge. Could it be...? As the scheming proliferates - a sham poisoning, a man watching his own funeral, a faked car crash, a man losing his identity - so do the moral questions (Can one destroy evil without becoming evil oneself?), even as a desperate embrace reveals a previously repressed, passionate love; and in a bitterly ironic twist, a sidestep into compassion leads directly to ruin. "Better than Shakespeare." - Francis Ford Coppola.

THE HIDDEN FORTRESS
(1958) Two constantly bickering and bumbling farmers on the run from clan wars are dragooned by superman general Toshiro Mifune into aiding his rescue of fugitive princess Misa Uehara and her family's hidden gold; at the last moment help arrives from a completely unexpected source. Probably Kurosawa's most dazzling exercise in pure filmmaking (his first use of Scope includes a Potemkin-in-reverse slave revolt; elaborately choreographed fire festival; and one of the greatest entrances in film history), and perhaps Mifune's most purely swashbuckling vehicle. Like the greatest of screen action heroes, he did all his own stunts - including a fight on horseback at full gallop; an extended spear duel with the opposing general; and effortlessly yanking up a cohort behind him as his mount thunders toward a hairbreadth escape. This richly comic fairy tale for adults is pure entertainment from the masters, and acknowledged as the source for Star Wars - didn't that plot synopsis sound familiar? "Grand, bold moviemaking." - Roger Ebert. "Easily surpasses Lucas' trilogy in derring-do." - Carrie Rickey, Boston Herald.

YOJIMBO
1961) "You can't get ahead in this world unless folks think you're both a cheat and a killer." Met at the entrance to a seemingly deserted village by a stray mutt sauntering past with a severed hand in his jaws, grubby, wandering and unemployed samurai Mifune, after a suitable double take, realizes a skilled yojimbo (bodyguard) could rake in the ryo in this town. And after checking out the sake merchant's thugs squaring off against the silk merchant's goon squad, twice as much, if he hires out to both sides. Venice Festival acting prize to Mifune; with Tatsuya Nakadai as the pistol-waving killer. Spaghetti-Western fans take note: the plagiarism suit against Leone's A Fistful of Dollars was settled out of court. "Kurosawa has made the first great shaggy-man movie. Yojimbo is a glorious comedy-satire of force: the story of the bodyguard who kills the bodies he is hired to guard." - Pauline Kael. (See the sequel, Sanjuro, August 27-29).

RED BEARD
(1965) In a 19th century slum clinic for the poor, a gruff doctor straightens out arrogant young intern Yuzo Kayama (normally star of the "Young Guy" urban comedy series), and through his hard-boiled warmth and stern compassion - and skill in martial arts - creates, instead of that "circle of evil" familiar through myth and fable, rather a circle of good. A Japanese Dr. Kildare super-production? (Nearly two years in the making, the entire back lot town was built using materials about as old as they were supposed to

be.) Not with a heavily bearded Mifune (Best Actor, Venice) as the "Dr. Gillespie" mentor and with Kurosawa pushing his style and the themes of his life to the limit. Kurosawa: "Yes, a cycle of some kind has concluded. From now on I guess I'll be making a different kind of film." And he was right. This was, after 16 films in 17 years, the last collaboration with Mifune; the last film in black and white; the last film before Dodeskaden's drastic change of style and viewpoint. Kurosawa's third Kinema Jumpo award-winner for Best Film.

SANJURO

(1962) "You are like a sword without a scabbard. But swords, really good ones, should be kept in their scabbards and not used at all." In a secluded temple, painfully sincere young samurai, led by Yuzo Kayama of Red Beard, meet in secret to plan how to save the day in their clan's power struggle - then they hear this yawn. A wandering samurai just can't get any sleep - it's Mifune, repeating his role (with variations) as Sanjuro of Yojimbo, grudgingly proceeding to straighten out, bail out, and shock the straight arrows ("We do not know how to thank you." "How about giving me some money?"); while contending with the delicate sensibilities of rescued aristocratic lady Takako Irie; a captured spy who keeps forgetting what side he's on; and a debate over which color flower should be the signal for the final attack. Tatsuya Nakadai, resurrected from Yojimbo, is an even more formidable antagonist; his showdown with Mifune comes to a conclusion startling even to the actor, who wasn't told beforehand that Kurosawa would be employing a never-before-used special effect.