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Sugata Sanshiro (Judo Saga)

1943, b/w, 80 min. A Toho Production. Distributed by Films Inc.

Director: Akira Kurosawa **Screenplay:** Akira Kurosawa, based on the novel by Tsuneo Tomita **Cinematography:** Akira Mimura **Art Direction:** Masao Totsuka **Music:** Seichi Suzuki

Cast: Susumu Fujita (Sugata Sanshiro), Denjiro Okochi (Shogoro Yano, his teacher), Yukiko Todoroki (Sayo Murai), Akitake Kono (Yoshima Dan)

Kurosawa's very first film heralds themes that were to reappear throughout his later work: the search for personal fulfillment by a dedicated individual, the dignity and perseverance of an average man, the education of the hero. Set in the 1890s, the story deals with the early development of judo. Sanshiro Sugata, an innocent young student of the martial arts, apprentices himself first to an arrogant teacher of jujitsu, but is soon converted to the superior way of judo by a master who stresses spiritual ideals and discipline over the morally void techniques of jujitsu. Sanshiro struggles to control his wilder impulses and to adhere to his master's spiritual guidance. Eventually, to uphold the honor of his master and school, Sanshiro is forced to fight off successive challenges from skilled opponents by joining technique to spiritual purity.

To this simple fable of moral education, Kurosawa brought an intensity and energy and a lithe narrative style that made the film an astonishing debut for the 33-year-old director. Equally impressive were the performances he elicited from his actors.

Its quasi-military subject and its firm moral message that individual zeal and ambition must be restrained were both obvious attractions for the censors. To these Kurosawa adds: "At that time -- right in the middle of the war -- the censorship bureau was being extremely strict about what could or couldn't be filmed. Since most artists couldn't step out of line and were doing only work that was in accord with national policy, I decided to make a really old-fashioned motion picture...It was just right as an entertainment picture, and when you think that this was 1943, it was about all we were allowed to make at the time."

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