

Document Citation

Title	Kurosawa and 'Kagemusha' highlight SF Festival
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Source	<i>East West (San Francisco, Calif.)</i>
Date	1980 Oct 15
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Kurosawa, Akira (1910-1998), Omori, Tokyo, Japan
Film Subjects	Kagemusha, Kurosawa, Akira, 1980

East/West, October 15, 1986

Kurosawa and 'Kagemusha' Highlight SF Festival

PROGRAM NOTES



Akira Kurosawa and directors Francis Ford Coppola (center) and George Lucas. The two American filmmakers served as executive producers of "Kagemusha" and helped convince 20th Century-Fox to finance the movie.

By RICHARD SPRINGER

There are the great film directors and then there is Akira Kurosawa. He's in a class by himself. The SF Film Festival retrospective for the Japanese director last weekend at the Palace of Fine Arts was an EVENT.

Clips were shown from "San-shiro Sugata: The Judo Saga," "Rashomon," "Ikiru," "The Seven Samurai," "Throne of Blood," "Sanjuro," and "Dersu Uzala." Generally, the clips were well chosen by tribute director Albert Johnson. They illustrated Kurosawa's concern with courage and camaraderie in battle, his maj-

tableaux on an epic scale, and the humanity and dignity of his central characters. The clip from "Ikiru," about a man who is dying of cancer, was particularly well chosen.

The questions to Kurosawa from the festival crowd were above average. My favorite was: "Who's telling the truth in 'Rashomon'?" (characters' different versions of a violent event). Kurosawa's surprisingly specific answer: "Probably the closest to the truth is the Woodcutter. But he's lying too."

SCRIPTWRITING

Kurosawa said that scriptwriting

is the most important element in his films. "If you have a first-rate script and give it to a third-rate director, you can still get a good film. If you have a third-rate script and give it to a first-rate director, you get a mess."

He said he had "the deepest affection for the character of the old hunter" in "Dersu Uzala." Kurosawa was attracted to the book as a young man. Dersu Uzala, he said, was a man who "treated plants and animals with the respect that he gave human beings. He was at one with nature—something we are losing in our civilized life," he said rather sadly.

About his popularity in America and his troubles in getting more support lately from Japanese audiences and financiers, "Yes, I am getting the feeling that my films are better accepted in the West than in Japan," he said. Then he added with sane humor, "and I don't know why myself."

EPIC

Kurosawa's latest, "Kagemusha (The Shadow Warrior)" has the epic scope of "The Seven Samurai," and a spectacular performance by Tatsuya Nakadai in a double role as war lord and the thief-double who impersonates the lord for three years after the clan leader's death. The color photography and framing of scenes by Kurosawa is unequalled.

One tableau that stands out for me beyond the rest: Nakadai as the thief, before the late lord's pages and guards, changing their light banter to awe as they see the rude bandit change his visage and mannerisms into those of the warlord. Nakadai's hand moves to his mustache. Kurosawa holds the image for just those few seconds longer than another director might hold the image. At that moment, the audience too believes the bandit can pull it off.

Another image: a messenger runs down stairs through a recum-



Tatsuya Nakadai plays two parts—warlord and a thief look-alike in Akira Kurosawa's "Kagemusha (The Shadow Warrior)."

diers. They stir belatedly to his rapid descent like slow bugs disturbed by a much speedier insect, who's long gone by the time they are aware it's been there.

IMAGE

Another unforgettable image: bodyguards protecting the thief make a ring around him during a fierce battle. Two of the guards are mere boys. Four of the guards are shot and they are piled in a heap a few yards from the impersonator. The thief can't keep his eyes from the limp, ghastly forms, the color of blood and ash. His expressive body and eyes indicate that he has finally understood the magnitude of the blind loyalty of the clan. Kurosawa takes the camera back to the dead figures for one more look. He doesn't want the audience to forget it either.

The performances of the supporting cast are uniformly good, but a standout is Tsutomu Yamazaki as the warlord's younger brother. He is made to look so much like Nakadai, that at first you think Nakadai is playing three roles. As good as the battle scenes are, as finely as the color photography and epic battles fill the screen, the best section in the film

brother and the retainers, of the thief, who must become like a lord and not just impersonate one.

"Kagemusha" begins this Friday at the Surf. Miss it at your own risk. Also, the Berkeley UC Theatre is presenting a 6-film retrospective of Kurosawa's samurai films Monday nights, October 20–Nov. 3.