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Live and Let Die

THE MOURNING AFTER

BY MICHAEL ATKINSON

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IKIRU

Directed by Akira Kurosawa
Written by Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto,
and Hideo Oguni
Cowboy/Janus
January 3 through 9, at Film Forum

LOVE LIZA

Directed by Todd Louiso
Written by Gordy Hoffman
Sony Pictures Classics, at Angelika

Could a 50-year-old Japanese film about a dying codger be the best film playing in New York this month? Nobody wants to sound like a bring-back-the-Thalia old fart, but Akira Kurosawa's wise, observant anti-spectacular *Ikiru* (1952), arriving in a new, newly translated 35mm print, is certainly one of the season's few unqualified sublimities. The sort of dependably sapient, soulful art film that used to wear the Janus Films logo like a duke's robe, the film is a Samurai-free study of aging and contemporary values—Ozu-ish issues he'd only return to 40 years hence, with his final film, *Madadayo*. Often heavy-handed but never less than heartfelt, *Ikiru* ("To Live") is universal in its thrust and startlingly astute in its narrative engineering.

The middle-class embrace of Kurosawa abroad wasn't any more surprising than America's impatience with Yasujiro Ozu. Kurosawa was always a popular artist—his themes self-declarative, his imagery muscular, his performances theatrical. His best movies rely on structural propulsion—even *Ikiru* is shaped like a mystery tangled in moral rope. This, his second film with frequent collaborator Shinobu Hashimoto, opens with the image of a carcinomatous X ray, with a narrator telling us that the film's hero, semi-catatonic government clerk Watanabe (Takashi Shimura), has stomach cancer but doesn't know it yet. When we see him, even as the narrator tells us "it would be boring to talk about him now" because he is "barely alive," Watanabe is huddled within walls of moldering bureaucratic paperwork. Anywhere but in a Japanese film he would be considered a Kafkaesque figure trapped in an absurdist hell; as it is, Kurosawa's tone is social realist, the closest "the emperor" ever came to being Vittorio De Sica.

All the same, Kurosawa remains fond of Wellesian mise-en-scène, shadowy über-close-ups, and melodrama. Watanabe's plight becomes clear to him in the doctor's waiting room, when a gabby patient clues him in to the lies he will be told. The numb widower bids decades of routine farewell and falls off the grid, boozing, clubbing, ice-skating, cathousing, and not showing up for work. It's hardly a last holiday—Watanabe is disgusted with himself. In one sepulchral scene he growls a song about lost love and fleeting time in a crowded honky-tonk, and everyone stops dead and slowly inches away—a requiem for Methuselah in a culture madly centered on the young.

Like Ozu's *Tokyo Story*, released a year later, *Ikiru* scrutinizes what little use the post-war generation has for its elders (though far from villainous, Watanabe's son is a self-obsessed lout), but its largest target is Balkanized local government. The portrait of buck-passing



MOOD SWINGS: TAKASHI SHIMURA IN KUROSAWA'S *IKIRU*

mini-departments and administrative double-speak verges on satirical. Halfway through the film the narrator informs us of Watanabe's passing, and the film's structure gets rearranged: We learn about the man's last few

months by way of flashbacks augmenting his co-workers' drunken debate during his wake. Thus, after drowning us in Watanabe's self-pity, the film keeps him at a second-hand remove once he becomes newly energized—a focus

shift from personal to political, where the interpretations of the ailing geezer's actions conflict and warp. Watanabe's stubbornness becomes a weapon. In one long, fascinating shot, Kurosawa places Shimura's submissively bowed head in the foreground as the office of pencil pushers around him grows increasingly uncomfortable.

At first shiver, Shimura's slow-moving, cow-eyed performance has a muted Kabuki-ness, but you quickly become aware of how chronic pain controls the character's movements (reportedly, Shimura was recovering from surgery himself), and how affectation toward masculine quietude can, over years, seize up a man's natural engine.