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THE ART FILM

THRONE OF BLOOD

Directed by
AKIRA KUROSAWA



THE THRONE OF BLOOD (KUHONOSU-JO)

Directed by
AKIRA KUROSAWA
and starring
TOSHIRO MIFUNE and ISUZU YAMADA

C R E D I T S

AKIRA KUROSAWA – The director of the picture—Born in 1910. His works won many prizes both in international and domestic film contests. He is worldly famous since his masterpiece, "Rashomon" which won the Grand Prix at the Venice Film Festival and an Academy Prize as the Best Foreign Language Film of 1953. His works include "Doomed", the Silver Bear Prize winner in Berlin, and "Magnificent Seven", the Silver Lion Prize winner in Venice.

TOSHIRO MIFUNE – who played Taketoki Washizu—Born in 1920. He is a favorite actor of Akira Kurosawa who directed him in most of his works including "Drunken Angel," "Rashomon," "Magnificent Seven," "I Live in Fear," etc. He also played the hero in "Samurai" which won an Academy Prize as the Best Foreign Film of 1956.

ISUZU YAMADA—who played Adaji—Born in 1917. She keeps her fame as one of the top-ranking star in the Japanese filmdom for over twenty years. She played the stellar role in many masterpieces before and after the war and also played as a by-player in numbers of pictures.

THRONE OF BLOOD by William Bernhardt

Macbeth minus Shakespeare, or *Macbeth* without a real *Macbeth*, might be an apt summarization of Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*. Having said so much, there remains nothing for the Shakespearean purists to do but throw up their hands in horror and run for the nearest exit. Those who are less passionately defensive may engage in an intellectual detection game, noting differences and similarities between source and adaptation, constructing a balance of debits and credits. But the howls of sacrilege and indignation that accompanied Orson Welles's free-swinging versions of the Bard in his *Macbeth* and *Othello* (efforts which when viewed a second time in the light of Welles rather than Shakespeare are seen to be amazingly perceptive of the possibilities of cinematic language as opposed to that of the stage) are less relevant when applied to Kurosawa's film, which is clearly labeled an adaptation of Shakespeare and which makes no attempt to use anything but the mere bones of the play.

Shakespeare reduced to story outlines, minus language and characterization, is something of an incongruity, but much more incongruous might have been Shakespeare transposed complete to medieval Japan. However, the danger still remains of throwing out the baby with the bath, and this danger *Throne of Blood* can not be said to have altogether overcome. Macbeth reduced to a strong warrior consumed by an overmastering lust for power is only part of the Macbeth which Shakespeare envisioned; this in itself is not enough to make a tragic hero. Tragedy comes from character, not from actions alone. Kurosawa's film has used Shakespeare's figure of Macbeth and has approximated his actions, but the depth of character which makes the play more than merely a chronicle of bloody events has been omitted. As a result, there is a shallowness about the central figure of the film which prevents the possibility of true tragedy and which has the effect of reducing Shakespeare to melodrama.

The theme of Kurosawa's version of *Macbeth* is set forth in the prologue to *Throne of Blood* and is reiterated again as an epilogue. This, we are told, against the ominous chords which begin the film, is the story of the lust for power of a strong warrior who was weakened by a woman and who was driven to spill his share on the throne of blood. The moral is made quite explicit: the path of the devil is the way of doom and it will never change its course. This circle of doom is the main theme of the film. The lust for power, with its foreordained conclusion, repeats itself cyclically.

As the film opens the kingdom is embroiled in tracking down a traitor who has attempted to seize power for himself; Captain Washizu (the Macbeth figure) is instrumental in bringing about his downfall. Later, the room in which Washizu plots the murder of the king is the same room in which he had killed an earlier traitor, and the walls still bear evidence of the bloody slaying. Washizu himself is caught up in the web of conspiracy and hacks his way to the throne, only in turn to be struck down as his course meets its justified end. And there are intimations that the cycle will continue. Unlike Shakespeare's play, Kurosawa's film does not end with the healing figure of a Macduff pulling together the loose ends of the kingdom into his capable hands. There is still unrest, and others may also be driven to spill their share on the throne of blood. The symbol of the crown stands in the background of many scenes as an ever-present reminder. And a potent symbol of Washizu's destiny is provided in the scenes with the spirit in the forest. Her predictions of his ascent to power are presented against a pile of bones and rusted helmets, reminders of the fate of past glories.

This figure of the spirit is one example of the changes made in adapting the original play. Shakespeare's three witches are metamorphosed into the single old woman, weaving her thread and her predictions in an unearthly forest, announcing the future in an unnatural voice that reminds us of the medium in *Rashomon*. Among the radical departures from the Shakespearean play are the addition of the birth of a child to Lady Asaji (the Lady Macbeth figure) and the final murder of Washizu by his own men. That the child should be born dead ("it was dead within her," says the doctor) is symbolically appropriate; the malevolently evil designs of this lady are incompatible with the act of giving life.

WILLIAM BERNHARDT is New York editor of *Film Quarterly*.

But the differences between Shakespeare's play and Kurosawa's film are less important than the filmic means Kurosawa has used to set forth his interpretation. Direction, cutting, music, and acting all combine to provide a film that pulses with excitement from the quick tempo of the opening scenes to the final moment of horror when Washizu is transfixed by a veritable wall of arrows. Camera angles and camera movement, composition and the use of interior space, are manipulated and controlled masterfully. Visually the film is a thing of beauty. The fog-drenched opening, with the mist gradually lifting to reveal the castle, sets a mood of somber eeriness. The muted grays of many of the exterior scenes contrast with the sharper blacks and whites of the interiors. Even the elements are used for dramatic and visual effect. The fierce winds that whip the banners in the opening scenes increase the tension of the council of warriors. The heavy grayness and fog surrounding the funeral procession accentuate the solemnity of the occasion. There is one magnificent use of darkness in the scene where Lady Asaji is totally swallowed up by the black night and then materializes a moment later again from the blackness, her approach signaled by the whispering rustle her clothes make as she walks.

One particularly brilliant use of sound and visuals illustrates simply yet beautifully the special power of the screen as a means of communication. When Washizu's castle is finally surrounded by his enemies, a guard is disturbed by the sound of chopping in the night; we do not see the action, we hear only the sounds coming from the distance. The next scene in the interior of the castle is interrupted by the sudden influx of a mass of birds wheeling around Washizu and his aides. The birds may in themselves be an omen, but their invasion tells us also that they have been dispossessed by the cutting down of the woods. The fulfillment of the spirit's final prophecy, that Washizu is safe until the wood surrounding his castle begins to advance, has been accomplished. We have not actually seen the woods cut down, but by this economic and elliptical means the point has been made.

The mastery over the means of film making shown by this brief example is evidence of the directorial prowess of Akira Kurosawa, a mastery which has been illustrated to American audiences by such diverse films of his as *Rashomon*, *Drunken Angel*, *Seven Samurai*, *Ikiru*, and *Throne of Blood*. Kurosawa's films have shown him to be an original and inventive film maker, a director who has constantly experimented with a wide range of cinematic means to achieve his effects. Whatever shortcomings *Throne of Blood* may possess in relationship to its original source, it is rich pictorially and of a whole stylistically.

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