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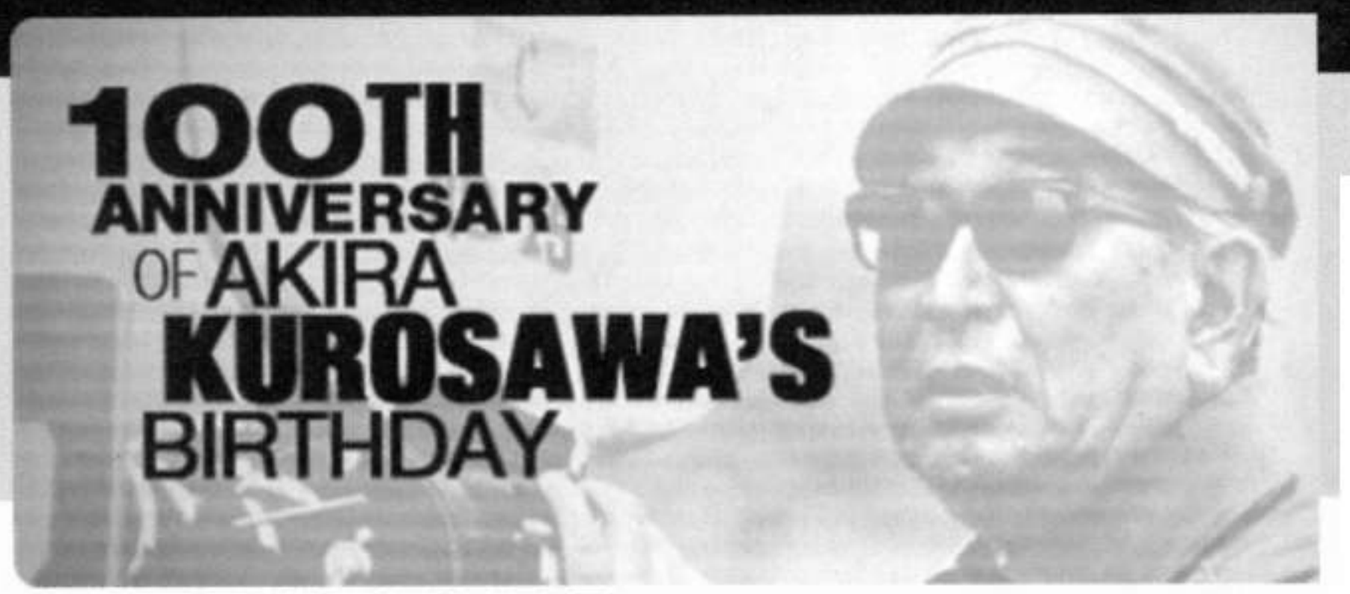

SPOTLIGHT

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- Akira Kurosawa Profile
- Featured Films
- Ikiru
- Throne of Blood
- The Hidden Fortress
- The Idiot (1951)
- The Lower Depths
- The Bad Sleep Well
- High and Low
- Red Beard
- I Live in Fear
- Scandal
- Sanshiro Sugata

The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail

Filmed between the two *Sanshiro Sugata* judo-powered hits that launched Akira Kurosawa's directing career in the 1940s, **They Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail** (1945, aka *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail*) was begun under one set of military censors -- Japan's -- and completed under another -- America's, whose occupation officials didn't allow its release until 1952. Barely an hour long and made on a shoestring budget, it's a small triumph of inventiveness and resourcefulness. Not a horse in sight, only a single set of a stagy-looking garrison, yet an often quite beautiful film, on a level with Laurence Olivier's wartime austerity version of *Henry V* (1944) in its ability to turn limitations and imposed artifice into inspired filmmaking.

Not that it has anything like Henry's Battle of Agincourt in it. Just the reverse. Set in 1185 A.D., **They Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail** is no

sweeping historical epic, no *Kagemusha* (1980) or *Ran* (1985). It's an episode, intimately scaled, subtly executed, where a slight lift of an eyebrow, or a commanding glance, speaks volumes. Nor is there any killing in it, although the tension arising from its moment-to-moment possibility stokes the drama as a victorious general, fleeing his own brother general turned enemy, must clear a heavily fortified mountain checkpoint set up to trap him. Unable to hack their way through it, the fleeing Lord Yoshitsune and his six diehard retainers must trick their way past.

To conceal himself, the general dresses as a porter, who spends most of the film under a wide conical straw hat, face unseen, pretending to be a bearer for the six veterans, who present themselves as itinerant Buddhist monks fronted by Yoshitsune's loyal samurai, Benkei (Denchiro Okochi). Upping the ante is the fact that the magistrate commanding the garrison, Togashi (Susumu Fujita – star of the *Sanshiro Sugata* films), has been alerted to the false monks on the lam. What ensues is mostly a duel of wits -- and demeanors – as the wily samurai Benkei seeks to persuade the commander that they're the genuine article.

To "prove" it, he "reads" their holy mission statement from a scroll that the commander can't see is blank, but we can. Minutes later, suspicion is aroused by the false porter's too-refined look. To save the situation (and their lives), the quick-thinking Benkei turns on the "porter" and beats him for being too slow and clumsy. This turns the trick. To the Japanese feudal mind, the thought that a samurai would manhandle his master, even if the latter is in disguise, is simply unthinkable. Or is it? Fujita's eyes tell us that the magistrate -- no stranger to people lying to him -- is not a stupid man. So perhaps he's letting them get away with it as his own noble-souled tribute to their devotion and chutzpah.

It's a provocative twist to a tale that could easily vanish in its measured rituals. The story is a staple of both Noh and Kabuki drama. But the static, stagebound nature of each required deconstruction and reconstruction to make it work in terms of film. Kurosawa, pulling an all-nighter, fashioned his own screenplay, using bold and frequently changing camera movements (especially his trademark wipes) and edits to promote a feeling of

fluidity. He also rewrote it, introducing a second porter. He cast in that role Kenichi Enomoto – a comedian famous in postwar Japan for his nervous mugging and hyperactive facial expressions.

Japanese film scholar Donald Richie wrote that it was like casting Jerry Lewis in *Hamlet*. But Kurosawa knew exactly what he was doing. A more appropriate analogy would have been to Shakespeare's drunken porter in *Macbeth* (later to be filmed by Kurosawa as *Throne of Blood*), punctuating the Scottish bloodshed with comic relief, giving the audience a chance to catch its breath until the next gory bit. Kurosawa's porter is more than comic relief. He's the audience's way into the play. However exaggerated, his reaction shots mirror our reactions and provide breathing room between the displays of deadpan nobility. So although Enomoto's playing is completely at odds with the rest of the film, it's exactly the kind of humanizing one would expect of a savvy storyteller.

A further bonus is the film's slew of Kurosawa regulars. Apart from Fujita, there's Massayuki Mori -- the husband in *Rashomon* (1950) -- and above all the great Takashi Shimura, also of *Rashomon*, *Drunken Angel* (1948), *Stray Dog* (1949) and *Seven Samurai* (1954). Also, a final Shakespearean parallel. After the film ends with the successful (or generously tolerated!) ruse, and Benkei's abject apology to his master for striking him is accepted, there's a drunken revel that ends with Benkei reeling offstage. Cut to Enomoto's hungover porter, blinking himself awake the morning after on now-empty land, amazed to notice he's been covered while asleep by the lord's brocade robe, left behind as a gift. Parodying Benkei, he dances off as well after his brush with his larger-than-life companions, much like Bottom the Weaver, awakening from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, rejoining the rest of us mortals.

Producer: Motohiko Ito
Director: Akira Kurosawa
Screenplay: Akira Kurosawa based on the play *Kanjincho*
Cinematography: Takeo Ito
Production Design: Kazuo Kubo
Music: Tadashi Hattori
Cast: Denjiro Okochi (Benkei), Susumu Fugita (Togashi), Kenichi Enomoto (Porter), Masayuko

Mori (Kamei), Takashi Shimura (Kataoka).
BW-60m.

by Jay Carr

Sources:
Akira Kurosawa: Something Like an Autobiography, Knopf, 1982
The Films of Akira Kurosawa, Donald Richie and Joan Mellen, University of California Press, 1999
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