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Lost Empire; Stolen Diamonds

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

BY AMY TAUBIN

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RAN

Directed by Akira Kurosawa
Written by Kurosawa, Hideo Oguni, and Masato Ide A Winstar release
UA Union Square Opens August 18

PLACE VENDÔME

Directed by Nicole Garcia
Written by Garcia and Jacques Fieschi
An Empire release
Paris Theater Opens August 18

In honor of their anniversaries and in conjunction with their DVD release, classic films are being restored and showcased in theaters for limited runs—last week it was *Gimme Shelter*; this week it's *Ran*, Akira Kurosawa's 1985 adaptation of *King Lear*. This bonanza for film buffs probably makes economic sense as well. While many DVDs are carelessly struck from scratched and faded prints, distributors who really care about film try to round up original printing materials and give them new life. Once you've gone to the expense of restoring a negative, it's not all that costly to strike a 35mm print along with the DVDs. And the critical attention given to the film in theaters boosts home-market distribution.

For aficionados of the war movie, the western, and the period action epic, *Ran* is necessary viewing. A film of brilliantly composed panoramas and intricately choreographed battles, it lacks, however, the psychological depth and dark poetry of Kurosawa's greatest Shakespeare adaptation, the Macbeth-based *Throne of Blood*—a claustrophobic, nearly first-person film that plunges you into the roiling psyche of a power-hungry, guilt-ridden, paranoid warlord. *Ran* operates in exactly the opposite way. It deliberately keeps you at a distance, all the better to meditate on the horror of human relations.

As he did in *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa adapted not only Shakespeare's narrative but also one of his big themes—man's lust for power and his alienation from the natural world and his fellow man. *Ran* cleaves in every respect to *King Lear* except that it's about a father and his sons rather than his daughters. The aged feudal warlord Hidetora (Tatsuya Nadakai) decides to divide his spoils among his three sons on the assumption that three acting in consort are stronger than one. Saburo, his youngest son, disagrees, arguing that a father who has ruled by violence should not expect his sons to show loyalty to him or to one another. Saburo is banished for his honesty, but his words prove true. The exiled Hidetora, wandering the fields with his fool and one loyal retainer, descends into madness. "Man is born in tears, and when he has cried enough, he dies," says the fool.

The Japanese word *ran* can be translated as "chaos," but there is nothing chaotic about the film, however bleak and bloody it is. Kurosawa contains the violence in almost classical rhythms. More than the brilliant set pieces (the first big battle scene, an orgy of bloodletting played in almost total silence) or the stunning images (a single figure in a sea of grass and rock; a battalion on horseback galloping along the shore, their herky-jerky movement the effect of shooting with an ultra-long lens), it's the shapeliness of the whole that impresses, as if Kurosawa had held the entire 160 minutes, like a painting, in his mind's eye. Kurosawa was 75 when he made *Ran*. He had prepared the film



BORN IN TEARS: TATSUYA NADAKAI IN *RAN*

for 10 years, drawing almost every shot. *Ran* was, at the time, the most expensive Japanese film ever, and Kurosawa made spectacular use of the \$12 million budget, which even then would have been chump change in Hollywood.

What the film lacks, however, are characters of any complexity. Betrayed by his sons, Lord Hidetora turns instantly from a vigorous, stubborn tyrant into a broken old man. He's incapable of the defiant rage of Lear's "Blow

winds" soliloquy or his inconsolable grief over Cordelia's death. In *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa found dozens of visual images as vivid and poetic as Shakespeare's language; in *Ran*, there's no equivalent for the moment when Lear confronts the absolute nullification of death by repeating the word "never" five times over. *Ran* is a magisterial film, but not quite a great one.