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MOVIE REVIEWS

Akira Kurosawa takes a chance on 'Rhapsody in August'

By Vincent Canby
The New York Times

Long regarded at home and abroad as the least Japanese of great Japanese directors, in part because his work has been so widely hailed outside Japan, Akira Kurosawa has now made his most Japanese film in years and, as might be expected, he has been damned for it.

When his new "Rhapsody in August" was shown out-of-competition at this year's Cannes festival, the critics were inclined to dismiss it for the simplicity of its structure and its moralizing tone.

The inference was that Kurosawa, born in 1910, was giving in to age, losing his touch.

Not so. The master is as vigorous and complex as ever, though now impatient with the world in which he has been making movies so productively since 1943.

(The film opens today at the Act in Berkeley.)

"Rhapsody in August" will be a shock to audiences who know Kurosawa only through his recent films, the grandly spectacular "Kagemusha" (1980), "Ran" (1985) and last year's "Akira Kurosawa's Dreams."

"Rhapsody in August" is something quite other.

It's a contemporary drama that is small in physical scope and apparently quite blunt about what it's up to. Though it seems to be stern, it is photographed in the bright, clear colors of youth, has moments of ravishing beauty and concludes with an image of profound lyricism.

It plays as if it were a mysteriously flawed summer idyll, a pastoral into which doomy thoughts had been allowed to enter by accident.

The principal setting is a farm just over the mountains from Nagasaki where, on Aug. 9, 1945, at 11:02 a.m., the Americans dropped their second and last atomic bomb, effectively to end World War II.

Four teen-agers, two sets of first cousins, have been left with their grandmother at the farm while their parents visit the grandmother's eldest brother, in Hawaii.

This fellow, whom the grandmother cannot clearly remember, migrated in 1920, stayed on to marry an American and to become rich as the owner of a pineapple plantation.

The children long to join their contact with Clark's company than with Clark.

They are thus surprised that, when Clark arrives, he apologizes to his ancient aunt for the bomb that killed her husband.

This is the film's sticking point, a not-great dramatic moment, anyway, and one that requires Gere to be simultaneously grave, concerned and honorable. The actor does well, but it's difficult for him not to look obsequious. A lot of people

Sachiko Murase is the grandmother of teenagers in 'August.'

at Cannes were outraged that the film makes no mention of Pearl Harbor and Japan's atrocities in China.

Good points, up to a point.

Kurosawa, not exactly a known militarist, says that he means "Rhapsody in August" to be against all war, and there are statements to the effect that during the war many people died on both sides.

Yet the message does get muddled. If Clark can apologize for bombing Nagasaki, why can't Granny apologize for the raid on Pearl Harbor?

That is to miss Kurosawa's real concern. I suspect that he would admit that he doesn't know how Americans feel about the war, and that the subject is beyond his speculation. Yet he does understand the Japanese character.

He's suggesting here that if Japanese, those of the children's parents' generation, are so convinced that Americans are unforgiving, it also means that the same Japanese are equally implacable. That is the danger to which he speaks.

Though Kurosawa's most faithful audiences are abroad, "Rhapsody in August" appears to have been designed primarily for home consumption. Its concerns are domestic. It was a risky movie for him to make, but also a brave and wonderfully stubborn one.

The children are scarcely more than attractive mouthpieces. They are idealized figures.

Yet the 87-year-old Sachiko Murase is very fine as the grandmother. If the others are generic, she is particular. She's a tiny, strange, unsentimental alien surrounded by the youth of her grandchildren, the cant of her own middle-aged children and her own demanding memories.

"Rhapsody in August" is didactic. But Kurosawa is such a natural film maker that even their parents in Hawaii, but make do as best they can with the loving but eccentric old lady. No television. No washing machine.

In the course of the summer the children take sight-seeing trips into Nagasaki. They go to the school where their grandfather, a teacher, died in the 1945 raid.

A tangle of rusted iron bars, a melted jungle gym, stands as a memorial in the schoolyard. "For most people today," says one child, speaking rather sagely for his age, "Nagasaki happened once upon a time."

They visit the black granite monolith that marks the spot over which the bomb was detonated. Surrounding the monolith are sculptures presented to the people of Nagasaki by virtually every developed nation in the world except the United States.

Back at the farm the grandmother tells the children stories that may or may not be true.

They have the aspect of myth. There is the one about her younger brother who was once saved from drowning by a water imp. Often she talks about the war, about her brother who, after the bomb, lost his hair and stayed in his room all day drawing pictures of "the eye."

Several days after the children's parents return, they receive word that their Japanese-American cousin Clark (Richard Gere) is arriving from Hawaii. It seems he has just learned that Grandmother's husband, his uncle, died in the raid.

The parents fret that Clark has come to break off relations with his Japanese cousins. Says one, "American don't like to be reminded of the bomb, especially Japanese-Americans."

The children are embarrassed that their parents really are more worried about losing his didacticism is touched by poetry. In "Rhapsody in August" he shows us the eye of the flash.

'Rhapsody in August' ★★★