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The Primal Screen

An Actor's Revenge 7:00

Kon Ichikawa (Japan, 1963)

(*Yukinojo benge*). It has been said that the best 'scope films have been made by Japanese filmmakers, perhaps because the tradition of scroll painting has prepared them for the formal challenges of the wide screen. *An Actor's Revenge* is as surprising in its use of screen space as in its plot twists. Who could resist the filmmaker's delight and playfulness in spreading his design across the screen? A Kabuki actor (Kazuo Hasegawa) knowingly manipulates the gossamer walls between theater, life, and afterlife to wreak a terrible vengeance on three villains responsible for his parents' death. Like his protagonist, Ichikawa casts such distinctions to the stage wings in interpreting a hoary melodrama with an audacious screen formalism that has been compared to a multi-layered jazz improvisation. He juxtaposes painted sets with naturalistic scenes, lets shadows go free, combines comic-book with Bertolt Brecht to bring the artifice of traditional Kabuki, with its lifts, revolving stages, and disappearing flats, into the film age.

• Written by Daisuke Ito, Teinosuke Kinugasa, Natto Wada, from a story by Otokichi Mikami. Photographed by Setsuo Kobayashi. With Kazuo Hasegawa, Fujiko Yamamoto, Ayako Wakao, Ganjiro Nakamura. (113 mins, In Japanese with English subtitles, Color, 'Scope, 35mm, From New Yorker Films)