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'Dodes'ka-den' a Shantytown Drama

BY KEVIN THOMAS

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"Dodes'ka-den" (at the Toho La Brea) is Akira Kurosawa's first film in five years. It is a masterpiece.

In that time Kurosawa, Japan's most famous director, underwent an abortive attempt to make the Japanese portions of "Tora! Tora! Tora!" and later suffered a serious breakdown.

Prior to that he had spent three years on "Red Beard," during which he also became ill, demanded a perfectionism that became legendary and saw the breakup of his long collaboration with Toshiro Mifune.

Therefore, it is not surprising that "Dodes'ka-den" is the kind of film that could only have been made by a man who has seen it all, lived through it all and survived the worst.

This superb picture, adapted from Shugoro Yamamoto's "The Town Without Seasons," unblinkingly embraces mankind in all its strength and folly, love and hatred, comedy and tragedy, to make a profound affirmation of life. "Dodes'ka-den" is one of this year's—and any other's—most important pictures.

Alongside Dump

It is the drama of a shantytown community alongside a dump outside a large city, perhaps Tokyo itself.

"Dodes'ka-den," which translates as "clickety-clack," is what a mentally retarded youth called Roku-chan, who opens and closes the film, keeps repeating to himself as he chugs up and down a path cleared amidst debris, operating an imaginary streetcar.

From this introduction the film becomes a series of stunning vignettes involving practically all the tiny community's inhabitants and revealing human nature in all its moods and aspects. Serving as a kind of a Greek chorus are a group of housewives who gather around a communal water spigot to do their wash and gossip.

Some of the citizens are remarkably courageous, such as the palsied man

who defends his rude and dominating wife to his insulted guests or the elderly jeweler who quietly persuades a thief to take his money but not his tools and another time succeeds in getting a young drunkard to turn over to him a sword he's brandishing wildly.

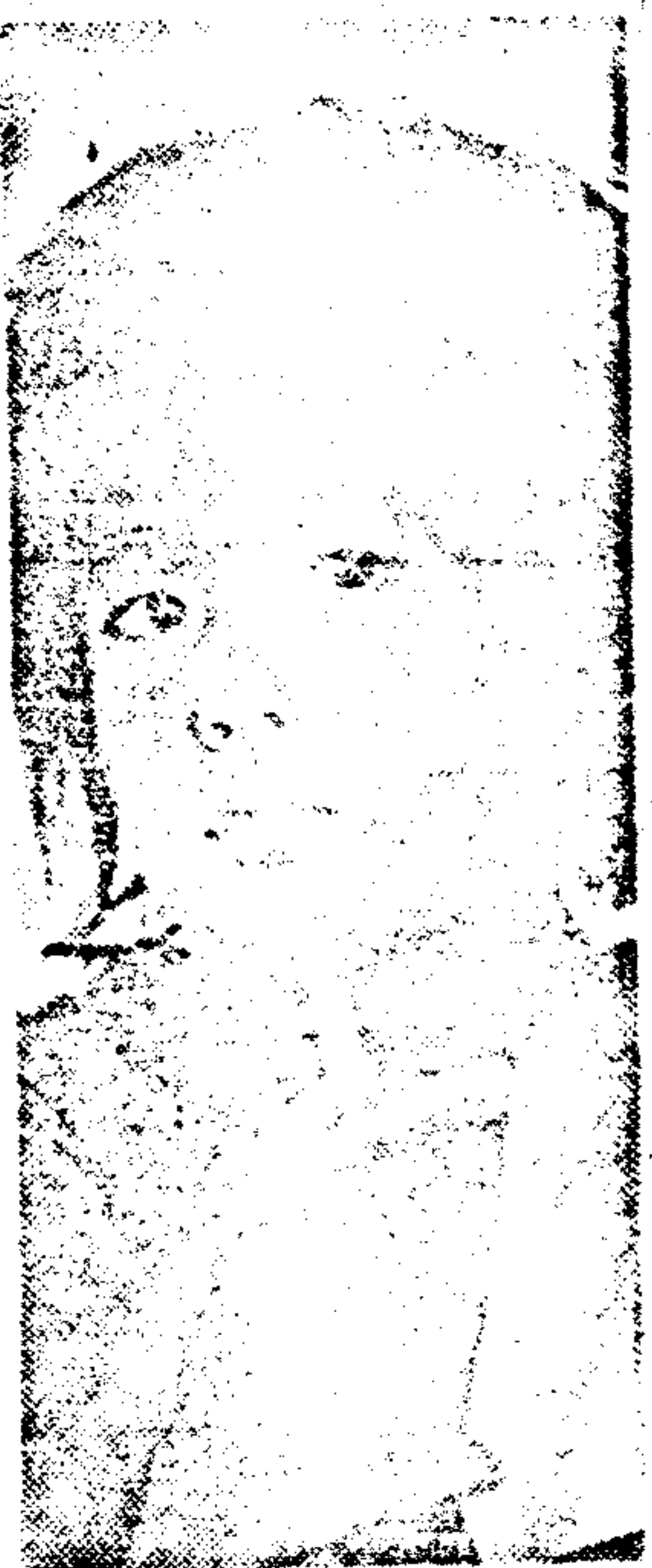
Sake Drinker

Some are incredibly selfish and slothful, like the sake drinker who would rather drive his sick wife's niece to collapse than help her with the tedious task of making the paper flowers that pays for his booze.

And some are tragically foolish, like the father who lives in a world of fantasy so completely, concentrating on building a house of gold, that he cannot face how desperately ill is his small son, one of those children who calmly accept the grimmest of realities without comprehending the enormity of their horrendousness.

Every moment of "Dodes'ka-den" is intensely alive—indeed, larger than life. Never has Kurosawa made so simple a film (except perhaps for his version of "The Lower Depths," which this film recalls).

Yet it is stylized just enough to give a heightened, almost theatrical sense of reality that gracefully incorporates fantasy



FEATURED — Hiroyuki Kawase appears in "Dodes'ka-den" at the Toho La Brea Theater.

sequences and uses color in rich, imaginative ways.

As always Kurosawa commands ensemble work from his cast, in this instance a largely unfamiliar one that is uniformly impeccable.

By the time Roku-chan takes his journey to nowhere that closes the film he symbolizes the inescapability of fate and the ceaseless attempt to transcend it with imagination—i.e., art—and the creator of "Rashomon," "Seven Samurai" and "Ikiru" has returned in triumph.