Document Citation

Title	**The lush look of a drag queen's revenge**
Author(s)	Steven D. Segal
Source	*Soho Weekly News*
Date	1979 Aug 30
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Ichikawa, Kon (1915), Uji Yamda, Japan
Film Subjects	Yukinojo henge (An actor's revenge), Ichikawa, Kon, 1963

Soho Weekly News 8/30/79

THE LUSH LOOK OF A DRAG QUEEN'S REVENGE

Hasegawa as Yokinojo: the most wonderfully perverse conceit of all

Rob Baker

An Actor's Revenge
Public Theater (thru Sunday)

If, like some of the more secretly perverse among us, you take as much delight in how a film looks as in what it says — if, in fact, you downright wallow in films of unabashed visual lushness and real cinematographic inventiveness, cherishing them without shame, like a pig does mud — then walk, hop, skip or roller-skate as fast as you can over to the Public Theater this week (only) to see Kon Ichikawa's *An Actor's Revenge*. Not that the film is devoid of thematic content — and fascinatingly idiosyncratic content at that — but because few films have made such extraordinary use of the cinemascope screen or color photography.

A consummate filmmaker who has consistently sought out the finest actors, writers, editors and cinematographers in Japan, Ichikawa has created a considerable body of work, from the early anti-war classic *The Burmese Harp* through a number of perverse, ironic comedies on social and sexual mores, down to his most recent works, a series of detective thrillers, beginning with *The Inugami Family*. Though these last have been in Japan the most commercially successful made-in-Japan movies ever, they have not found American distributors (*Queen Bee*, however, the fourth in the series, will be shown in the Japanese Spectrum series at the Bleecker St. Cinema next Tuesday). For all their wryness, Ichikawa's films always have a wonderful sense of humanity about them. His 1964 *Tokyo Olympiad* was, in fact, sent back to the cutting room by the producers with the admonition, "more sports, less people," thus virtually wrecking what those who have seen the original say was one of the great documentaries of all time.

But more than anything, Ichikawa is one of the great visual geniuses in the history of cinema. Having trained as an illustrator and an animator early in his career, he always considers the *look* of a film of paramount importance (as do directors such as Bertolucci, Antonioni, Fassbinder and Visconti), or at least of equal importance to the scripts (most of which have been co-authored by Ichikawa and his wife Natto Wada).

While most directors (and cinematographers) even today seem to have sort of stumbled into the use of widescreen visuals by default (or because their studios told them to), in this film in 1963 Ichikawa was consistently using the *whole* screen for pictorial and dramatic effect. And he was doing it with astonishing simplicity, offering not predictable travelog panoramas or wraparound production-number extravaganzas, but a bold use of the long frame itself to create tension, mood and an enveloping intensity that can be as actually and viscerally involving as the Cinerama rollercoaster rides of yesteryear.

Ichikawa achieves this with a deliberate formalism that is never cheap or gimmicky. He makes his statement, as it were, with the simplest of brushstrokes, and the clean, spare blankness of the rest of the canvas makes that stroke all the more important — so much so that the mere look of scene after scene (an artificial snowstorm, a lonely figure in a large wheat field, a swordfight in the dark) is enough to send shivers down your spine.

An Actor's Revenge tells the rather simple story of a Kabuki female impersonator who plots a clever revenge against the business associates who drove his parents to suicide. The Kabuki theatrical tradition from which the protagonist comes seems to have seeped into and taken over the very form and substance of the film. Everything about the film is colored and shaded by that tradition — its formalism, its concise patterning, the highly stylized tone of the sets and lighting (not just in the theater, but in the "real" world as well) and even the stylishly cool and sentimental characterization of the actor. That erosion of reality (and, by implication, cinema as the mirror of reality) by theater and theatricality (Kabuki having been the whole life obsession of the main character since early childhood) is the most wonderfully perverse conceit of all. The kinkiness of the concept pervades the entire

LUSH LOOK

Continued from previous page

mood of the film (much as it does in another Ichikawa work of the same period, *Odd Obsession*, in which an old man tries to cure his own impotence by forcing a young doctor to seduce his wife) — making for an exceptional, if unsettling, gut-level experience.

The fact that the actor is, moreover, a female impersonator is of importance to Ichikawa's overall statement, though this has been downplayed by some adherents of the film who insist that being a female impersonator in the Kabuki tradition has no relationship whatsoever to doing drag in the West. That denial of correspondences is poppycock, because the similarities of the transvestism in the two cultures far outweigh the differences. Moreover, the character Yokinojo doesn't just wear drag onstage, he lives as a woman and in women's clothes full-time, in every scene in the film. Among the most affecting scenes, in fact, are the irony-sequences where he, as part of his revenge plot, flirts with the young wife of one of his old enemies. Yokinojo's whole character is a carefully contrived womanliness *at all times*. The act is always homage, never ridicule or insult, to the object of identification. But his own emotions — including the "manly" rage for revenge — are always kept carefully bottled up behind the face of the woman he not only plays onstage, but in essence has become.

Ichikawa masterfully uses all this to explore various disturbing dichotomies in the film: masculinity vs. femininity, role-playing vs. "real life," theater vs. cinema. The actor who so perfectly plays Yokinojo (Kazuo Hasegawa) also plays the very butch — but somehow sensible and sensitive — Yamitaro, a peasant and part-time burglar who may even be a little in love with Yokinojo. This only layers the whole thing even further.

No easy answers should be drawn from any of this, but the images are firm and secure. It is proof positive of Kon Ichikawa's genius that they are as rich in elusive irony as they are visually stunning. ●