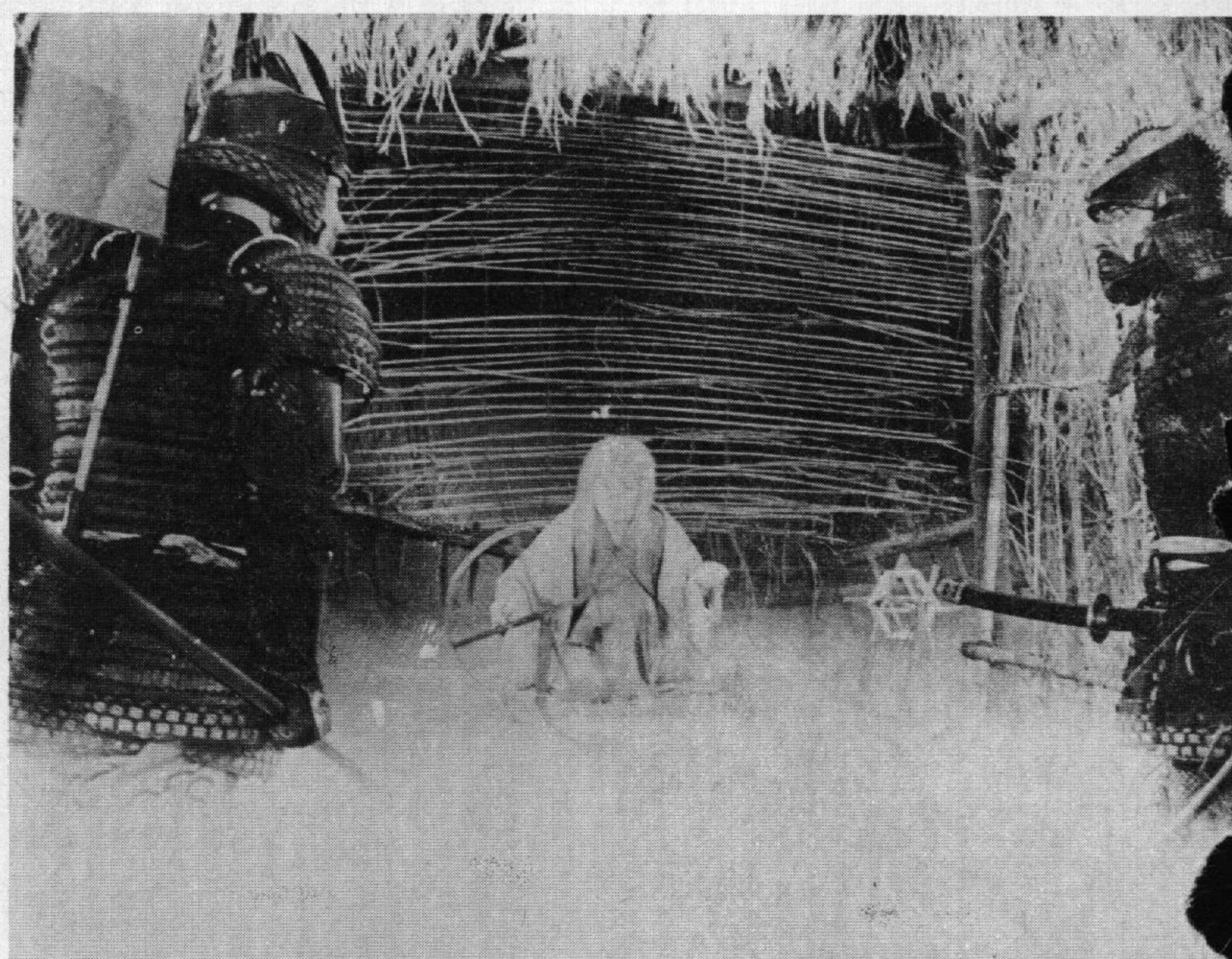


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In Kurosawa's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the film screen seems a living picture on which feudal pageantry and passions are as if brushed there.



The encounter of "Macbeth" (right) with the powers of witchcraft is a magic deception: the pivotal incident is poetically rendered in this scrupulously fine version of a foreign masterpiece.

Throne of Blood

1957 • JAPAN

or *The Castle of the Spider's Web*

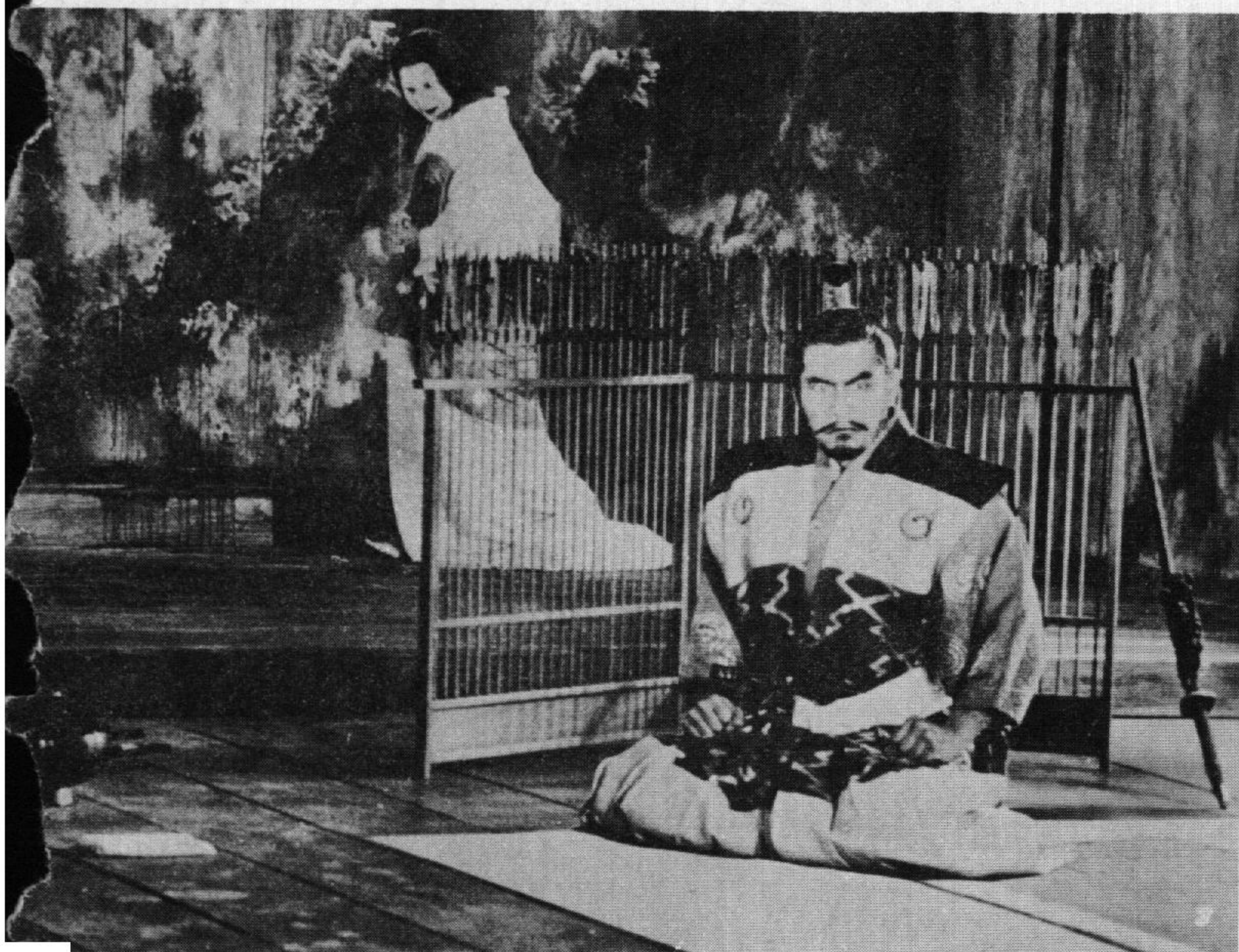
The influence of both Japan's elder classic drama, the Noh, and younger classic drama, the Kabuki, have contributed to the exquisite skill with which Akira Kurosawa has transferred Shakespeare's famous tragedy, *Macbeth*, to the film. The slow, highly precisioned pace of the former, hieratic and lyric, merges and contrasts with the impetuous, dramatically veering pulse of the latter; both, of course, hold elements of stylization. It seems a major artistic decision that Kurosawa refrained from using the color medium to invoke the vivid life of the stage, though his black-and-white screen may have resulted from considerations of budget. However that may be, one can hardly imagine a better adaptation from stage to film or nation to nation: surely not a better one if plotted within the same scope and convention as chosen by Kurosawa.

The air of primitive history, joined with the eerie atmosphere of even more primitive magic, suffuses the screen from the instant we see, in the opening shots, the great fortress castle once held by Macbeth's Japanese counterpart, swathed in mist, desolate in space, and

rendered with the most exacting Japanese aestheticism which I, for one, have yet seen on film. From the purely pictorial viewpoint, *Throne of Blood* is more of a piece than any Japanese classic I have included here. Transition from event to event, emphasis to emphasis in the narrative action, long view to short view and close-up, take place with the even, certain, smooth rhythm that is true only of a highly controlled style.

The warrior as an image of force and terror, especially when on horseback, is of the utmost picturesqueness here. I cannot vouch for the historical accuracy of either costumes or general treatment, but an impression of savage fierceness and feudal might is uncannily conveyed by Kurosawa's imagery and never spoiled in its beauty. The dramatic arabesques of ceremonially grouped warriors, their alternate impassivity and emotional eruptions producing a gripping tension, are things that soon establish a remote, fatal and exotic mood for the tragedy.

That most-seen actor in Japanese films, and possibly their very best one, Toshiro Mifune, who played the



Japan's classic drama, the Noh, dominates the mood and style of "Lady Macbeth's" goading of her husband to kill his guest. The tragedy advances with remarkable fidelity to its source.

Bandit in *Rashomon*, has the Macbeth rôle and seems to have been—as to all his rôles—born to it. We have here generally, in their most continuous and thus arresting form, certain style-traits of Far Eastern acting such as the guttural exclamations, the "face" making and the especially distinct hieroglyph of the medieval Japanese warrior; his postures derive from the dance itself, for we see it in the Gagaku, the Royal Court Ballet, as well as in the styled poses of the Japanese period films. The council of war lords sits in typical posture, knees spread wide and toes out, looking like so many "ideographs" of awesome military power.

Kurosawa makes a taut melodrama of the beginning, a Samurai war, then introduces us to the incident of the witches' prophecy, here that of one witch: magically, poetically rendered, indeed. The film then faithfully follows the plot of Shakespeare's tragedy, making ample use of all possibilities of headlong speed, open panorama and mysterious forest depths. An actress of classic face and style, Isuzu Yamada, is a perfect "Lady Macbeth." The reception of Banquo, his murder and that of the grooms, even the handwashing in Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, all come in their turn, sustaining a most remarkable tragic tension. Macbeth's drunken vision of Banquo's ghost is beautifully, horrendously transposed to Oriental terms. We then actually see the wood in motion—and a lovely sight it is!—but Kurosawa reserves one radical innovation for the climax. His Macbeth has no mortal duel with Macduff but is shot to death inside his fortress by his own army, suddenly made aware that they, like him, have been



The hero in his mad fit when he sees "Banquo's" ghost: every turn of the plot is translated into an impeccable Japanese idiom.

doomed by fulfilment of the witch's prophecy. Countless zooming arrows lodge in his chain armor as he staggers from corner to corner of a series of galleries opening on the courtyard. It is a stunning scene, as vividly catastrophic and final as any heroic death in films.



A magnificently designed climax offers no mortal combat with "Macduff": the frenzied warlord is riddled with arrows by his own soldiers when the prophecy of the moving Wood is fulfilled.