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THE CHALLENGE

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(R)

(EMBASSY PICTURES)

Color/I.85

110 Mins.

Cast: Scott Glenn, Toshiro Mifune, Donna Kei Benz.

Credits: Directed by John Frankenheimer. Produced by Robert L. Rosen and Ron Beckman. Executive Producer: Lyle Poncher. Written by Richard Maxwell and John Sayles. Original Music by Jerry Goldsmith. Edited by Jack Wheeler. Photographed by Kozo Okazaki.

A thinking persons action pic, beautifully made and worked out. Ironically, because of its very quality, it may prove unpopular.

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Frankenheimer and screenwriter-novelist John Sayles (with Richard Maxwell) collaborated here. Both are revisionist filmmakers—Frankenheimer with *Impossible Object*, 99 44/100 *Dead*, *French Connection II* and even the unsuccessful *Prophecy*, Sayles with his scripts for *The Lady in Red*, *Alligator*, *Battle Beyond the Stars* and *The Howling*. The two work well together. The only flaw is that while Frankenheimer might want to linger over a sequence longer to capture the detail and the possible beauty there, the movie-wise Sayles is hurrying to show off his next knowledgable movie cliché.

Sayles' script tells of an American drifter (Scott Glenn) hired to 'mule' a sacred Samurai sword into Japan. After being abducted at the Japanese airport, he is taken to the streamlined fortress of an evil industrialist. He escapes with a woman (Donna Kei Benz) to the home of the woman's father (Toshiro Mifune), where it is revealed that the father is the brother of the industrialist and also that the two have been carrying out a war for decades over the hallowed weapon. Eventually, the American falls in love with the woman, becomes a warrior for the father, and kills the evil brother.

Pic is lush with allusions to other films. The presence of Toshiro Mifune summons up images of his role in Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, while a feud over a mystical blade was the premise of Terence Young's 1971 *Red Sun*, in which Mifune also starred. And Sayles further weaves in such filmic staples as the adorable Oriental boy who becomes the heroine's loyal pal and is almost killed. All of Sayles embellishments fit snugly, and Frankenheimer stages the script immaculately. This film is extremely violent. None of it, though, is gratuitous; some of it is lyrically appropriate. Frankenheimer has made some memorable movies — *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Seven Days in May*, *The Gypsy Moths* — and while this new one is not quite on par with these others, it is a worthy successor.

The actors here are all nicely utilized by Frankenheimer, and Glenn, in his first lead, is solid, Kozo Okazaki's lensing is richly textured, and Jerry Goldsmith's score is superb. However, pic may fill the classic bill of the artful genre piece that the thinking audience doesn't want because of its dubious trappings, and the other audience rejects because of its occasional thoughtfulness.

—Dean Billanti