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MOVIE REVIEW

A Double Homage in 'The Yakuza'

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In Japanese "yakuza" means eight-nine-three, a worthless combination in an illegal gambling game, and has become slang for "good-for-nothing." Today the word means "gangster," and the yakuza genre has become the most popular in Japan.

The yakuza hero, in whom the samurai's code of honor persists, is a man in constant conflict over his obligation to duty and to humanity—a conflict often resolved only in death.

"The Yakuza" (at several theaters) is an ambitious American thriller attempting to pay homage to the yakuza movies and also to a certain extent the *film noir*, those bleak, pessimistic crime pictures and melodramas, often made on B budgets, of the '40s and early '50s. Indeed, "The Yakuza" was originally developed—with a subsequent polish by Robert Towne—by the young critic Paul Schrader, an authority on the *film noir*, from a story written by his brother Leonard, who has lived and taught in Kyoto for several years.

The idea of this double homage is at once intriguing and contrived, and "The Yakuza" is unfortunately both. Above all, however, it suffers from a self-consciousness so stultifying it never really comes alive, its sense of reality (or lack of it) deriving from other movies instead of life itself.

And because it doesn't come to life, its many displays of violence, staged by director Sydney Pollack in a perfect emulation of the unsparingly

'THE YAKUZA'

A Warner Bros. presentation of a Sydney Pollack production. Executive producer Shundo Koli. Co-producer Michael Hamillburg. Producer-director Sydney Pollack. Screenplay Paul Schrader, Robert Towne; from a story by Leonard Schrader. Camera Okazaki Kozo. Camera American sequences Duke Callaghan. Music Dave Grusin. Art director Yoshiyuki Ishida. Production designer and second unit director Stephen Grimes. Costumes Dorothy Jeakins. Supervising film editor Fredric Steinkamp. Film editors Thomas Stanford, Don Guidice. Featuring Robert Mitchum, Ken Takakura, Brian Keith, Herb Edelman, Richard Jordan, Keiko Kishi, Eiji Okada, James Shigeta, Kyosuke Mashida, Christina Kokubo, Eiji Go, Lee Chirillo.

Running time: 1 hr. 52 min.

MPAA-rated: R (persons under 17 must be accompanied by parent or adult guardian).

gory but lightning-fast Japanese style, seems exploitative by default. Pollack is a generally good director of actors but lacks the strong auteur personality essential to carrying off so highfalutin a project as this. (One similar that did come off, triumphantly, was the late Jean-Pierre Melville's "Le Samourai," in which Alain Delon played one of Melville's typically Americanized Parisian gangsters who chooses to die like a samurai.)

Anyway, Robert Mitchum—who early in his career was in one of the finest *films noir*, "Out of the Past"—is an ex-private eye, now a small-time real estate agent in L.A. His old army pal is Brian Keith, a shady shipping magnate whose daughter has been kidnaped by a yakuza (Eiji Okada) because Keith has failed to deliver a shipment of arms.

Mitchum owes Keith a favor all the way back to the days of occupied Ja-

pan when Keith lent him the money for a farewell gift to his Japanese girlfriend (Keiko Kishi) so she could open a bar in Tokyo. Mitchum had wanted Miss Kishi to marry him, but she rejected him when her brother—actually husband, (Ken Takakura) but Mitchum doesn't know it—thought dead, returns from the Philippines several years after the war is over. Knowing that Takakura became a yakuza, Mitchum hopes that through him he will be able to make contact with Okada, reassure him that Keith intends to make good on his deal.

Naturally, things don't turn out that easily, but through the lethal chain reaction Mitchum inadvertently triggers both he and Takakura, who is Japan's perennial box-office champion yakuza star, do emerge as men of honor. (The real world of the yakuza and that of Japanese movies is somewhat different, needless to say.) The moment of their mutual recognition of this is actually quite touching, especially as played by Mitchum with his world-weary presence and by Takakura, a figure of immense quiet dignity and force.

But this is not enough to absolve all the tedium and slaughter that precedes it. For "The Yakuza," in its self-consciousness, is one of those films that is forever explaining itself as it unfolds in its rigidly schematic way.

The line between the heroic and the foolish is ever a thin one, and "The Yakuza's" yammering about honor amidst so much carnage seems often absurd, downright silly. The gap between idea and its realization is finally too wide.

However, this handsome stylish film, done very much in the Japanese manner, might just whet the appetites of some viewers for the real thing. Authentic yakuza pictures, produced by Toei Studios, are played constantly at its only theater in continental United States, the tiny Linda Lea at 251 S. Main St.