

Document Citation

Title	The bailiff
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Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Sanshō dayū (Sansho the bailiff), Mizoguchi, Kenji, 1954

Japan, 1954

Original title, SANSHO DAYU; SANSHO THE BAILIFF

Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi

Screenplay by Yoshikata Yoda and Fuji Yahiro, from the novel by Ogai Mori

Photography: Kenzuo Miyagawa

Music: Fumio Hayasaka

Decors: Kisaku Ito

Produced by Masaichi Nagata (Dalei)

125 minutes. US distribution by Macmillan/Audio Brandon

CAST: Kinuyo Tanaka (Tamaki, the mother)
 Yoshiaki Hansyagi (Zushio, her son)
 Kyoko Kagawa (Anju her daughter; later called Shinobu, "Patience")
 Eitaro Shindo (Sansho, the bailiff)
 Ichiro Sugai (Hanzo, his son)
 Chieko Naniwa (maid)
 Ken Mitsuda (Prime Minister Fujiwara)
 Masao Chimizu (Tamaki's husband, the governor)
 Akitake Kohno (Norimura, the judge)
 Kikue Mori (priestess)

SANSHO DAYU received the Silver Lion at the 1954 Venice Film Festival

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FROM THE FINAL INSTALLMENT OF YODA'S MEMORIES OF MIZOGUCHI, which appeared in Cahiers du Cinema, November 1968:

"Before leaving for Europe (for the presentation of UGETSU MONOGATARI at the Venice Festival - p.s.) Mizoguchi had given Mr. Fuji Yahiro the job of ~~drafting~~ the scenario for SANSHO DAYU. This project rather surprised me. SANSHO DAYU is a story by Ogai Mori (great writer of the Meiji period 1867-1912) whose heroes are children. Now, Mizoguchi had never made a film whose principal characters were children. He scarcely liked children. In fact he loathed children. I'd never seen him smile at a child. Could this have been because he hadn't any? He often said to me, 'Don't lose any time by bothering yourself with kids! An artist must not have a family, in order to be able to create his work!' As soon as we were back Mizoguchi asked Mr. Yahiro if the scenario was ready. Mizoguchi was dying to shoot. The award UGETSU MONOGATARI had received at Venice had given him as much energy as confidence! 'This time, we're not going to do just any old thing again,' he announced as a kind of warning to the production company.

"Mr. Yahiro's adaptation of SANSHO DAYU was very honorable, very faithful to the original story. But Mizoguchi started in, as I'd expected. 'What! A kid story? I want the same story - but without children!' Mr. Yahiro gave up. 'Yoda, I'm giving the job to you.' As Kyoko Kanaga had been chosen for the role of Anju, the sister, and Kisho Hanayagi for the role of Zushio, the brother, I rebuilt the plot to suit the idea I had of these actors. Therefore, contrary to Mori's story, I made Anju the younger sister of Zushio. The prologue of the film SANSHO DAYU is faithful to the story, but the later part, in which Anju and Zushio are adults - which constitutes the major part of the film - is almost entirely from my pen. Following his custom, Mizoguchi advised me, 'Begin by studying the history of slavery. Become familiar with the social and economic functions of slavery.' Mori's story was extremely concise, abstract, with its anecdotal and descriptive details only sketched in. My first work in adapting was therefore to paraphrase, to detail, to concretize the content, and, more particularly, to give a historical framework to the drama. For example, in the story, the mother of Zushio and Anju leaves with her children in order to find her husband, who had left long before to go to the province of Tsukushi. But why had the husband gone there? Why was he still not back? The explanation wasn't given. Mizoguchi wanted him to have been exiled because of his disagreement with government policy: he had provoked the anger of the Chief of State, who refused to admit that a high functionary have his own ideas - revolutionary ideas - about social equality: he wanted to defend the cause of the peasants and the slaves. This ideology was mixed in, for him, with his religious faith. So, leaving on his journey, he entrusts to his children a very rare statue of the Buddha. We thought that this statue would symbolize the faith of the characters (Anju and Zushio have the misfortune to be sold as slaves and this ill luck brings them to religious awareness and to a social reflection about the freeing of slaves) and that it would also be a dramatic device (the mother, now blind, recognizes Zushio by touching the golden statue). We tried to raise this popular fable to the level of a social drama, by studying the prefeudalism and buddhism of the period (the end of the Heian era (794-1185)). In the film Zushio succeeds in freeing the slaves but the mother remains blind; in the story her eyes had been reopened by the miraculous power of the statue Zushio is carrying...."

Translated and prepared by Peter Scarlet