

Document Citation

Title	'Blossoms and swords: the films of Tai Kato'
Author(s)	Tod Booth
Source	<i>SF Weekly</i>
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Kato, Tai (1916-1985), Kobe, Hyogo, Japan
Film Subjects	

Second Time Around

"Blossoms and Swords: The Films of Tai Kato"

Samurai and yakuza films dominated Japan's movie screens for decades; but here in the U.S. most people think the genres begin and end with a couple of Kurosawas and John Belushi's *Saturday Night Live* Samurai Grocer. There's no better place to plunge into the huge, wonderful world of Japanese genre cinema than the nine-film retrospective of to-die-for wide-screen prints by Japan's great B-movie writer/director, Tai Kato, at the Pacific Film Archive starting Aug. 8. Kato made fast, cheap, gorgeous genre movies for Toei, one of several Japanese studios well-known for cranking out yakuza and samurai product in the '50s and '60s. They were assembly-line films, usually shot in less than three weeks and following a strict star system and formulas as inflexible as the yakuza code of conduct. To distinguish oneself in this movie factory took the keen eye and razor-sharp precision of a master samurai, and Tai Kato had the goods.

The title of his 1951 debut film, *Trouble Over Swords and Women*, pretty much sums up his 30-year oeuvre. Kato is interested in how the rigid codes of the samurai and yakuza rub up against the real, messy world of passion; it's what gives his movies their mournful edge. *Love for a Mother*, made in 1962 and playing Saturday, opens with one of Kato's amazing battles, in which gambling swordsman Chutaro (samurai superstar Kinnosuke Nakamura) reluctantly helps a buddy take on the Iioka gang. After wrapping up that little problem, Chutaro heads to Edo to continue



Love for a Mother.

his lifelong search for his mother, who abandoned him as a child. He shyly asks nearly every older woman he meets if she has a son named Chutaro, and so hears the sad stories of many a beggar and over-the-hill prostitute. Chutaro's bittersweet journey is occasionally interrupted by moonlit battles of flashing swords, since the vengeful Iioka gang has followed him — making the film the perfect double-edged distillation of Tai Kato's melancholy world.

Blood of Revenge, also on Saturday, is as complex and baroque as *Love for a Mother* is stripped-down. Set in the early 1900s, it's sure to remind you, like many of Kato's films, of an American western, with its horse and buggies, string ties, high collars, and dirt streets. Rival yakuza gangs fight for control of the town's construction trade, while rival yakuza bosses vie for the attention of a beautiful prostitute, played by Junko Fuji. (The fantastic Fuji also plays the title role of a wandering gambler in the *Red Peony Gambler* series, two of

which, *Flower Cards Match* and *Red Peony Gambles Her Life*, screen at the PFA later this month.) *Blood of Revenge* ends, appropriately enough, with our hero, sword in one hand, gun in the other, charging straight into the bad guy's lair in classically reckless yakuza fashion. Kato had two signature stylistic devices — extra-long takes and low-slung camera angles. (His crew would sometimes have to dig a hole for the camera.) Both tricks, along with his emphasis on the loneliness of the rootless underworld of gamblers, drifters, and killers, make his films unlike any others of his era.

— Tod Booth

Blood of Revenge screens Saturday, Aug. 8, at 7 p.m. (with *Love for a Mother* at 8:45 p.m.) at the Pacific Film Archive, 2625 Durant (at College) in Berkeley. Tickets are \$6, \$1.50 more for the second film. Call (510) 642-1124.