



**JAPAN 2021: 100 YEARS OF JAPANESE CINEMA**

# Tokyo Olympiad

Near the beginning of Kon Ichikawa's film of the Tokyo Olympic Games, a great iron builder's weight is seen crashing into a half-demolished building as the Olympic Stadium begins to grow. The tone is set: this is to be a film about violent physical activity; though not quite a hymn to straining muscles and national pride. Sport for me, Ichikawa seems to say, comprises graceful bodies in motion plus a kind of bizarre unnaturalness almost akin to vaudeville and the circus. And it is to Ichikawa's credit that he manages to alternate these concepts without any obvious changing of gears, looking at the events with a hundred camera eyes which seem like one, and always seeking the involving, close-up view.

Such is the sustained beauty of the filming that it is tempting to stop and make a catalogue of exceptional moments, or relish the way Ichikawa has made the torch carrying sequence seem 'directed' as in a story film, culminating in the great shot of planes weaving the Olympic emblem in a sky spattered with pigeons and with the symbolic flame blazing in the foreground. His unit seemed to have everything, notably a marvellous range of telephoto lenses; but all the technical knowhow and equipment in the world need a master to control them, and a close look at individual sequences shows that Ichikawa's genius lies in the strict selectivity of the material. The aerial views of torchbearers and retinue rounding a mountainside, or a bird's eye run over the marathon track, are some of the most beautiful in all cinema, but there are only about half-a-dozen in all. Similarly, the pole gymnastics and swimming have one vertiginous overhead shot apiece, timed for the maximum plastic and dramatic effect. And, true to the great Japanese film tradition, Ichikawa is not afraid to take an event to pieces: thus, the women's hurdles are shown first at ordinary speed, then we flashback to the preparations and see the whole thing again in slow motion, shot from one set-up and silent except for a shattering percussive clap when a hurdle is knocked over.

Until we saw *Alone on the Pacific*, it was difficult to believe that Ichikawa's early career included satirical comedies and cartoons. Now, in the Olympics film, one somehow remembers Horie pottering about his little boat and coping as best he can. This is the same ironic, slightly lugubrious artist's eye which now watches the Russian weight throwers' rhythmic tics or the weight lifters' bulging veins as they drop their dreadful load, or photographs a rifle expert in such a way that gun and fleshy cheek momentarily take on the aspect of a surrealist landscape. Each viewer will find his own favourite bits of humorous observation: mine include the sudden vision of rows of bobbing American hats, and the Japanese girl who whistles nonchalantly and turns a careless somersault as she waits for something to happen.

Nearly thirty years separate the two great Olympics films (Berlin 1936 and Tokyo 1964); but the marked differences between the two extend beyond the mere fact that Ichikawa was able to draw on colour, widescreen and technical resources unavailable to Riefenstahl. Visually, the films come closest together in the gymnastics and the marathon. Both record the former in fluid, brightly lit set-ups mainly from above and below (there is really little choice), and both are extremely beautiful. In the marathon, each director was lucky in having

competitors who played up so manfully, like the moments when they pause at the little stands to choose their drinks (thus allowing Ichikawa to pinpoint those delightful coloured sponges being prepared by somewhat harassed Japanese officials). When Riefenstahl inserts her famous shots of piston-like legs surging forward to Herbert Windt's music, the effect is heroically larger than life; Ichikawa's key shot here is the long, relentless close-up of the Ethiopian winner's intently set features, drawing us irrevocably inwards to his lonely private thoughts.

Neither film cancels out the other: Riefenstahl's packs a greater voltage of excitement which can still set an audience cheering; Ichikawa's is simply more human without being mawkish, not least in the final parade where the swaying mass of competitors merges imperceptibly into the throng of spectators and one feels there is perhaps one world after all. At Cannes, Ichikawa ruefully reported the misgivings of the Japanese Olympics Committee, who would obviously have preferred a newsreel to an artist's personal view. 'They even asked whether I could re-shoot some of it, but I was able to reply truthfully that circumstances prevented it.' And how lucky for the cinema.

**John Gillett, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1965**

Fanatic admirers of Leni Riefenstahl's film of the 1936 Berlin Olympics are not likely to find Ichikawa's much more idiosyncratic version of the Tokyo Games very easy to swallow. For one thing, the excitement which can still keep audiences cheering on the edge of their seats at 30-year-old events is missing from *Tokyo Olympiad*, except perhaps in the sequence showing the fantastic dash and thrust of the women's volleyball final between Japan and Russia. For another, unlike Riefenstahl's film, Ichikawa's is not a hymn to national glory, international glory, or even straining muscles and streamlined limbs. Its mainspring is curiosity – what, one imagines Ichikawa asking himself, are these people *doing?* – followed by fascination and amusement in roughly equal parts.

The film opens with images of solemn celebration as a builder's weight thunders into a wall to clear the way for the new stadium, the Olympic torch is carried through the world until it passes beneath the shadow of Mount Fuji, cheering crowds watch the athletes pouring proudly into the arena, and the final torch-bearer climbs a seemingly endless flight of black-draped steps before emerging at last to light the flame. Yet even here the exaltation is counterbalanced by Ichikawa's quirkish humour. As the Olympic oath is gravely intoned, a flock of pigeons sweeps lyrically across the stadium, and a girl athlete shrieks and ducks in terror, while an official marches sternly across to reprimand a bird squatting on the track; as the athletes parade through the stadium, the American contingent is introduced by two unkind shots from the rear, so that the men in their curly-brimmed hats bob up and down like puppet cowboys, while the girls with their close-cropped hair scurry past like rats.

Ichikawa's selections from the material captured by his 164 cameramen almost always end up with one or the other – fascination or amusement – for his eye is not that of an expert or an impartial observer, but of a delighted amateur. Enormous shot-putters twiddle and flutter like ballet dancers in an effort to find the perfect balance; hammers soar out over the arena to land with a delicious squelch deep in the mud; one competitor waits absorbed in prayer, another whistles a few casual bars, spreads out a towel, and turns a somersault as nothing else seems to be happening. The overall feeling is

almost of an abstract pattern of movement, effort and concentration, sometimes fantastic and sometimes beautiful, as swimmers tum with the flashing grace of porpoises, a sudden stop-shot on a fist captures the exact moment when a hammer-thrower lets go, the Ethiopian marathon runner pads effortlessly along like a piece of faultless machinery. Slow-motion cameras record the almost intolerable tension as the sprinters wait, interminably, on their marks for the starting pistol; telephoto lenses cut in to seize the overpowering sense of strain and effort behind a record-breaking throw; and all the time the cameras affectionately seek out the exceptional, whether gay (the fat Russian weight-lifter's beaming smile as he hoists his enormous load), or touching (the gold medal swimmer weeping quietly as she stands on the platform for her award), or absurd (the rather belated marathon competitor who has time to pause and choose his drink as though at some garden fête).

Needless to say, the Eastman Colour camerawork is often strikingly beautiful, and sometimes used – or rather, not used – very imaginatively. The gloom of a rainy day, for instance, is evoked by using a uniform tint of mournful bluish-purple; and for the savage brutality of the boxing, Ichikawa distastefully cuts into black-and-white. Ichikawa, in fact, has made an Ichikawa film, and there seems to be little point in reproaching him for not doing what Leni Riefenstahl had already done supremely well. Her film still stands as a towering monument; and now *Tokyo Olympiad* sidles up alongside, not in the least overawed.

**Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1965**

---

**TOKYO OLYMPIAD (TÔKYÔ ORINPIKKU)**

*Director:* Kon Ichikawa

*Production Companies:* Toho Co. Ltd.,

Organising Committee for the Games of the 18th Olympics

*Producer:* Suketaru Taguchi

*International Version:* Donald Richie

*Production Assistants:* Jun Kiyofuji, Asao Kumada, Senkichi Taniguchi

*Screenplay:* Natto Wada, Shuntaro Tanikawa,

Yoshio Shirasaka, Kon Ichikawa

*Photography:* Shigeo Hayashida, Kazuo Miyagawa,

Juichi Nagano, Kinji Takamura, Tanashi Tanaka

*Editor:* Kon Ichikawa

*Art Director:* Yusaku Kamekura

*Music:* Toshiro Mayuzumi

*Sound:* Toshihiko Inoue

*Technical Director:* Michio Midorikawa

Japan 1964

170 mins

Supported by:

  
Grand Seiko

In partnership with:

JAPAN FOUNDATION 

With special thanks to:



---

**With the kind support of:**

Janus Films/The Criterion Collection, Kadokawa Corporation, Kawakita Memorial Film Institute, Kokusai Hiei Co. Ltd, Nikkatsu Corporation, Toei Co. Ltd

**Join the BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](http://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)

---

**BECOME A BFI MEMBER**

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

**BFI PLAYER**

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)