



RE-RELEASES

Rashomon

Unreliable narration is taken to a new level in this landmark film, one of Akira Kurosawa's finest, which introduced post-war Japanese cinema to international audiences. A murder takes place in a forest. A samurai is killed. A court convenes and three testimonies are heard: a bandit, the samurai's wife and the samurai himself, from beyond the grave. Each testimony differs in significant ways. These sequences are presented in flashback, told by a commoner to a woodcutter and priest as they shelter from a storm underneath Rashomon city gate. However, these three also have their own perspectives on what actually happened. Adapting Ryunosuke Akutagawa's short stories 'Rashomon' and 'In a Grove', Kurosawa and co-screenwriter Shinobu Hashimoto (*Ikiru*, *Seven Samurai*, *Hidden Fortress*) make the most of the fragmented narrative structure to question the nature of truth and objectivity.

Kazuo Miyagawa's cinematography, particularly the use of 'dappled' light in the forest scenes, creates further ambiguity, while the heavy storm in the framing scenes add tension, particularly in the climactic confrontation between the three men. The film won the Golden Lion at the 1951 Venice Film Festival and an Honorary Oscar for the most outstanding foreign film. It remains one of the key works of Japanese cinema.

Asif Kapadia and Ian Haydn Smith, season curators

A contemporary review

Rashomon, some may argue, can fairly rest upon the merits we first see in it, upon the pleasure and inspiration it gives to Western audiences. We are, of course, easily led to over-estimate a film where dialogue, setting and attitude are alike exotic. I have seen eminent Italian critics astonished and embarrassed by our admiration of certain Italian films, and at the same time they have perceived in some brightly conventional English picture a significance to us invisible. It is, then, important to be able to set a foreign film in, so to speak, its national context. With *Rashomon*, moreover, the problem grows infinitely complicated, for it confronts us with a tradition and a point of view perhaps the most remote from our own world. Some 70 years ago the Whistlerian circle rediscovered Japanese art for the West, they admired blindly the roughest theatrical print, the most repellent view of Fujiyama commanded their ecstasies. It took time and experience before the West could distinguish the attack of mere novelty from the claims of excellence.

In the case of *Rashomon*, an important first consideration is its historical setting. Japan escaped foreign invasion till the summer of 1945; nevertheless, few countries have known more violent vicissitudes of fortune. Periods of enlightened prosperity have continually alternated with others of agonising disorder, time and again the central authority has collapsed into banditry, or into a feudalism scarcely distinguishable from it. As suddenly, order has revived, and a brilliant period of tranquillity has followed.

Rashomon is set in a moment of desperate anarchy, in the eighth century, from which Japan seemed doomed never to rise. The first few feet of film

masterfully establish the mood of the times. Relentless rain drives a servant, a priest and a woodcutter to shelter under a broken down, once pompous, Kyoto gate. While they wait there, the inner story of *Rashomon* is unfolded in four conflicting versions. Rain and dilapidation frame nine-tenths of the picture. Yet a Japanese audience would remember that upon this apparently hopeless moment will shortly follow one of the most glorious epochs in their history, the almost too exquisite age we slightly know from the Tale of Genji. We soon become tolerably certain that dawn must follow the darkness. Sure enough, with the epilogue the downpour ceases, and an abandoned baby is discovered. If the woodcutter, already a father of six, heightens his plight by adopting it, this altruism at least restores the priest's battered belief in humanity. Here the symbolism bears an implicit but obvious reference to Japan's recent chastisement and her present recovery. It is also oddly reminiscent in mood of German silent films of the 1920s. They were also made in the aftermath of defeat.

With the central story, on the other hand, the film assumes a different style. This is an episode of violence, of virtue and of feudal honour in danger. In short, when one has stripped it of all modern embellishments, here is an episode in which the Japanese popular-heroic theatre, the 'Kabuki', habitually delights. In almost all 'Kabuki' stories we find a duel, where the contestants, hissing and agile as cats, leap and spring about each other with an acrobacy that never becomes ridiculous, nor ceases to excite. In *Rashomon* we find just such a duel. And though we see it in two different versions, so admirably photographed and played is it, we are not for a moment fatigued by repetition. Repetition is indeed a salient quality of the 'Kabuki' theatre. The pieces generally played are long, gestures are stereotyped, events move round and round to the same point. (Yet to the Western eye, provided one does not see too much of it, the 'Kabuki' formula is probably the most satisfactory style for playing melodrama that exists today.)

The suggestion that the director Akira Kurosawa has borrowed the traditions of the 'Kabuki' theatre for his central narratives, does not at all decry the remarkable performances of his three principal actors – Toshiro Mifune as the bandit, Machiko Kyo as the wife, Masayuki Mori as the nobleman. The story is a basically simple one upon which almost musical variations are worked. The crux of the film lies in the conflict between the bandit's confession, the wife's story, the husband's evidence from the tomb conveyed through a medium, and the final revelation of the woodcutter sheltering under the gate.

We find ourselves here in a world where social conventions and psychological reactions are alike alien to us, and at the same time infinitely absorbing. When we discount the familiar elements of the 'Kabuki' theatre, when we admit the occasional slowness of direction, the slightly monotonous quality of the wife's tearful prostrations, we must still concede that here we are in the presence of a genuinely original work of art, one which by its example could enrich the technique of the Western cinema. Kurosawa's extraordinary alternations of long shot and close-up, particularly where we see the wife idly moving her hand in a stream, and the sequence of the woodcutter's journey into the forest, reveal to us how much we have lost through fear of violent camera movement; the police examination of the bandit, staged against a plain whitewashed wall, has an unsurpassed simple reality, the invocation of the dead husband, the medium's whirling sleeves, and the final revelation in the tortured face of a soul that has found no peace in death, is a moment of unique poetry.

Even if some recent visitor to Japan, then, were to assure me that the intelligentsia of Tokyo hailed *Madonna of the Seven Moons* as a pattern of advanced filmmaking and an inspiration to future Japanese films, I should still believe *Rashomon* to be one of the most stimulating and extraordinary pictures made anywhere in the world since the end of the war.

Simon Harcourt-Smith, *Sight and Sound*, July 1952

RASHOMON

Director: Akira Kurosawa

©: Daiei Co., Ltd.

Production Company: Daiei

Producers: Jinkichi Minoru, Sojiro Motoki

Assistant Directors: Tai Kato, Mitsuo Wakasugi, Tokuzô Tanaka

Screenplay: Akira Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto

Based on the stories 'Rashomon' and 'In a Grove' by:

Ryunosuke Akutagawa

Director of Photography: Kazuo Miyagawa

Lighting: Kenichi Okamoto

Editor: Shigeo Nishida

Art Director: So Matsuyama

Music: Fumio Hayasaka

Sound Recording: Iwao Tani

Sound Effects: Shoichi Yamane

Cast

Toshiro Mifune (*Tajomaru, the bandit*)

Machiko Kyo (*Masago, the wife*)

Takashi Shimura (*the woodcutter*)

Masayuki Mori (*Takehiro Kanazawa, the nobleman*)

Minoru Chiaki (*the priest*)

Kichijiro Ueda (*the servant*)

Fumiko Homma (*the medium*)

Daisuke Katô (*the policeman*)

Japan 1950©

88 mins

A BFI release

KUROSAWA

The Most Beautiful (*Ichiban Utsukushiku*)

Sun 1 Jan 13:50; Mon 9 Jan 18:15

The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail (*ora no O Fumu Otokotachi*)

Sun 1 Jan 16:20; Wed 11 Jan 17:55

No Regrets for Our Youth (*Waga Seishun ni Kuinashi*)

Mon 2 Jan 12:45; Tue 10 Jan 20:40

Seven Samurai (*Shichinin no Samurai*)

Mon 2 Jan 16:50; Thu 5 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 15:30 BFI IMAX

One Wonderful Sunday (*Subarashiki Nichiyôbi*)

Tue 3 Jan 20:40; Sun 15 Jan 11:50

Scandal (*Shûbun*)

Tue 10 Jan 17:45; Tue 24 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by season co-curator Ian Haydn Smith)

Kagemusha

Wed 11 Jan 19:35; Tue 31 Jan 19:35

The Idiot (*Hakuchi*)

Fri 13 Jan 19:45; Sat 21 Jan 16:50

Dodes'ka-den (*Dodesukaden*)

Sun 15 Jan 18:05; Mon 16 Jan 17:50

Kurosawa Season Introduction

Wed 18 Jan 18:20

High and Low (*Tengoku to Jigoku*)

Thu 19 Jan 17:45; Sun 29 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by season co-curator Ian Haydn Smith)

The Lower Depths (*Donzoku*)

Thu 19 Jan 20:20; Mon 30 Jan 20:20

The Hidden Fortress (*Kakushi Toride no San-Akunin*)

Fri 20 Jan 20:20; Fri 27 Jan 17:45

The Bad Sleep Well (*Warui Yatsu hoho Yoku Nemuru*)

Sun 22 Jan 18:00; Sun 29 Jan 14:30 (+ intro by season co-curator Ian Haydn Smith)

Sanjuro (*Tsubaki Sanjûrô*)

Thu 26 Jan 21:00; Tue 31 Jan 17:50

Course: The Kurosawa-Effect

Wed 11 Jan – Wed 22 Feb 18:30

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