



**KUROSAWA**

# Kagemusha

This magisterial epic of 16th-century Japan was Akira Kurosawa's great homecoming movie after a decade either working abroad or in the doldrums following the critical drubbing faced by his 1970 film *Dodes'ka-den*. Backed by George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola, it was a return to the *jidaigeki* (period film) mode of *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Throne of Blood* (1957), albeit now in lavish colour and mounted on a scale that – in the era of CGI – looks ever more awe-inspiring. It's something of a companion piece to his subsequent *Ran* (1985): not directly inspired by Shakespeare as that would be, but Shakespearian in its movement between courtly intrigue and clashes on the battlefield, and especially in its focus on a double/impostor figure. In the Sengoku, or 'Warring States', period, a thief resembling the leader of the Takeda clan becomes a vital decoy after the latter is taken out by a sniper.

**Samuel Wigley, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk), 12 March 2021**

## **Kurosawa on *Kagemusha***

Whatever one thinks of *Kagemusha* – the Japanese critics were generally less indulgent about its weaknesses than their Western counterparts – the film is unmistakably a maverick project. Who but Kurosawa would have responded to the commercial failure of his first wholly independent film (and the bankruptcy of the directors' co-operative that produced it) by dogmatically insisting that his next project be the most expensive production ever undertaken in Japan? And, for that matter, opting to shoot a Mosfilm epic rather than a more obviously viable project at home? The film bears the marks of Kurosawa's intransigence: not just in the scrupulous insistence on historical accuracy, but also in the script's refusal to integrate the story of Takeda Shingen's double with the larger story of the fall of the Takeda Clan to produce a more conventionally unified dramatic structure.

I heard a story (possibly apocryphal) that Toho had specified in its contract with Kurosawa that he would make a film not exceeding three hours in length; the price it paid for this temerity was to have the director deliver a version lasting two hours, 59 minutes and 30 seconds for the Japanese release, prior to cutting 20 minutes from the 'international' version which was delivered to 20th Century-Fox.

*The film tells three related but distinct stories: those of Takeda Shingen, of the kagemusha and of the Takeda Clan. One could imagine any one of them being the basis for a film in itself. How did you resolve the film's structure?*

At the beginning, something very ambiguous comes into my mind as an idea; I let it mature by itself, and it goes into several specific directions. Then I go away somewhere to immerse myself in writing the scenario. It's less a matter of working within a defined structure than of letting myself be moved by the characters I've chosen to work with. I always try to start with the first scene. I myself don't know what direction it will take from there; I leave everything to the natural development of the characters. Even if my collaborator suggests that we should do something specific the next day, it never works out as foreseen. The spontaneous development of the characters is the most interesting part of the writing process for me.

In the case of *Kagemusha*, I was working on an adaptation of *King Lear* (which production costs have so far prevented me from turning into a film) and I was researching the Sengoku Jidai period (the clan wars of the late 16th century). I grew very interested in the Battle of Nagashiro, which remains a question mark in history. No one has satisfactorily explained why all the *taisho* of the Takeda Clan should have died, while not one *taisho* of the Oda or Tokugawa Clans did. I started to consider ways of tackling this interesting question. It occurred to me that Takeda Shingen was known to have used many kagemusha (doubles), and I thought that by approaching the historical enigma through the eyes of one such kagemusha I might keep the subject to manageable proportions. Once I'd hit on the idea of making the kagemusha a petty thief, I had to consider how this man could become so immersed in the character of Shingen that he would actually 'become' him. I decided that it must be because of the strength of Shingen's own character. Then I reflected that the *taisho* who died in battle must also have been charmed or enchanted by Shingen. In effect, they committed suicide at Nagashiro – they martyred themselves for Shingen. They must have been in love with him, if you will.

Hence the three stories, or three strands of one story, evolved by themselves. It was never an intentional design.

*How much is known about the actual character of Shingen?*

It wasn't possible to get a very specific image: the way he looked and behaved is not recorded in the histories. But it was possible to get some impressions from his contemporaries' reactions to him, which are recorded. For example, Tokugawa Ieyasu had great respect for him: he wrote that he considered Shingen's *taisho* to be his equals in rank. Oda Nobunaga criticised Shingen a lot, but he must have respected him too, because he gave one of his relatives in marriage to Shingen's son Katsuyori. I'm sure that Nobunaga considered Shingen his most eminent rival. Also, it was possible to draw some conclusions from the motto that Shingen raised on his battle standards: 'Swift as the wind, silent as the forest, as sweeping as fire, as immovable as the mountain.' He took the words from the Chinese military strategist Sun Zi, which is interesting in itself.

*You portray both Tokugawa and Nobunaga as much younger men than Shingen, which gives the film the general sense that something ends when Shingen dies, and something new begins with the victors... Is that why you cast new actors as the other clan leaders?*

Historically, Shingen was about 52, Nobunaga was about 40 and Ieyasu was in his thirties. There are several historical versions of Shingen's death: the one I used in the film has him shot by a sniper, while others have him dying of tuberculosis or some other disease. I thought it would be more interesting to have him die in good health. Had Shingen lived and captured control of Kyoto (and hence Japan), Japanese history would assuredly have been very different. Once Nobunaga ruled the country, he was assassinated, and it was only then that Japan came into the hands of the Tokugawa family. It was a fateful moment in Japanese history. It is clear that Nobunaga was a genius, a much more 'modern' man than the average Japanese of that time. According to the missionaries, Nobunaga knew that the earth was round, and was well informed about the world situation. He was also an active importer of new objects and ideas from abroad. That was the sort of personality that defeated the Takeda Clan. Of course, we cannot be sure that Nobunaga would have continued like that if Shingen had lived on ...

I cannot say that I deliberately set out to show the transition from the older world to the newer, but since I was interested in the personalities of Nobunaga and Ieyasu (or at least in Ieyasu in his youth), I gave them some emphasis in the film. They stood in contrast to Shingen's son Katsuyori. I chose the actors to play Nobunaga and Ieyasu partly because their faces resembled the descriptions we have of the actual historical persons, and partly to create a fresh image of the characters. Had I used stars in those roles, I think they would have created an obstruction for the audience. It would have been different if I'd shown only Nobunaga or Ieyasu as the central character in a film, but since their appearances in *Kagemusha* are relatively few and brief, I used new faces to create an immediate strong impression. Furthermore, Ryu Daisuke and Yui Masayuki are very talented actors!

*Katsu Shintaro (best known for his role as the blind swordsman Zatoichi) was originally scheduled to play Shingen. Did your conception of the character change when you cast Nakadai Tatsuya?*

I had a fixed image of Shingen. Katsu Shintaro didn't understand what I wanted, there was an 'incident', and he left the production. So it was not a case of the character changing with the casting, but of Nakadai giving me what I wanted. When I direct a film, I need to have actors who can follow my directions.

### **Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1981**

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#### **KAGEMUSHA**

*Director:* Akira Kurosawa  
*Production Companies:* Toho Co., Ltd., Kurosawa Productions  
*Executive Producers:* Akira Kurosawa, Tomoyuki Tanaka  
*Executive Producers of International Version:* Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas  
*Associate Producer:* Teruyo Nogami  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Inoshiro Honda  
*Unit Production Manager:* Toshiaki Hashimoto  
*Chief Assistant Director:* Fumiaka Okada  
*Assistant Directors:* Hideyuki Inoue, Takao Ogawara, Takashi Koizumi  
*Script Supervisor:* Teruyo Nogami  
*Screenplay:* Akira Kurosawa, Masato Ide  
*Directors of Photography:* Takao Saito, Masaharu Ueda  
*Cinematographers:* Kazuo Miyagawa, Asaichi Nakai  
*Lighting Cameraman:* Takeshi Sano  
*Assistant Cameramen:* Tamio Matsuo, Takehisa Takarada, Yukitake Isohata, Tadashi Furuyama, Ryuji Wakiya, Masahiro Miyajima  
*Optical Effects:* Takehisa Miyanishi, Akira Kondo  
*Negative Cutting:* Tome Minami  
*Assistant Editor:* Keisuke Iwatani  
*Art Director:* Yoshiro Muraki  
*Assistant Art Directors:* Tsuneo Shimura, Akira Sakuragi, Katsumi Kobayashi  
*Set Decorators:* Hatsumi Yamamoto, Daisburo Sasaki, Koichi Hamamura  
*Scenic Artists:* Kazuo Yamato, Nobuyoski Miyamoto, Masakatsu Tanaami  
*Costumes:* Seiichiro Momosawa  
*Make-up:* Junjiro Yamada  
*Wigs and Hairdressing:* Shigeo Tamura  
*Hair:* Yoshiko Matsumoto  
*Music:* Shinichiro Ikebe  
*Music Performance:* New Japan Philharmonic Orchestra  
*Conductor:* Kotaro Sato  
*Sound Recording:* Fumio Yanoguchi  
*Assistant Sound:* Mamoru Yamada  
*Sound Effects:* Toho Sound Effects Group  
*English Subtitles:* Donald Richie  
*Adviser:* Shinobu Hashimoto  
*Transport:* Isamu Miwano  
*Samurai Etiquette:* Ryu Kuze  
*Horseback Riding:* Toshi Hasegawa, Tamihei Shirai

#### **Cast**

Tatsuya Nakadai (*Shingen Takeda, the Lord of Kai, Takeda/Kagemusha, Shingen's double*)  
Tsutomu Yamazaki (*Nobukado, Shingen's younger brother*)  
Kenichi Hagiwara (*Katsuyori Takeda, Shingen's son*)  
Kohta Yui (*Takemaru, Katsuyori's son*)  
Hideji Otaki (*Masakage Yamagata*)  
Hideo Murata (*Nobuhara Baba*)  
Takayuki Shiho (*Masatoyo Naito*)  
Shuhei Sugimori (*Masanobu Kosaka*)  
Noboru Shimizu (*Masatane Hara*)  
Koji Shimizu (*Kasusuke Atobe*)  
Sen Yamamoto (*Nobushige Oyamada*)  
Jinpachi Nezu (*Sohachiro Tsuchiya, servant*)  
Kai Ato (*Zenjiro Amemiya, servant*)  
Hiroshi Shimada (*Jingoro Hara, servant*)  
Eiichi Kanakubo (*Okura Amari, page*)  
Yugo Miyazaki (*Mataichi Tomono, page*)  
Mitsuko Baisho (*Oyunokata, concubine*)  
Kaori Momoi (*Otsuyanokata, concubine*)  
Kumeko Otowa (*Takemaru's nurse*)  
Naruhito Iguchi (*Takemaru's servant*)  
Daisuke Ryu (*Nobunaga Oda*)  
Tetsuo Yamashita (*Nagahide Niwa*)  
Yasuhito Yamanaka (*Ranmaru Mori*)  
Masayuki Yui (*Ieyasu Tokugawa*)  
Yasushi Doshita (*Kazumasa Ishikawa*)  
Noboru Sone (*Ieyasu's chief samurai*)  
Norio Matsui (*Tadatsugu Sakai*)  
Toshihiko Shimizu (*Kenshin Uesugi*)  
Takashi Shimura (*Gyobu Taguchi, Deputy of Nobunaga Oda*)  
Francis S. Sercu, Alexander Kairis,  
Jean-Pierre Carlini (*missionaries at Shingen's bedside*)  
Kamatari Fujiwara (*Shingen Takeda's doctor*)  
Toshiaki Tanabe (*Kugutsushi, spy disguised as puppet-player*)  
Yoshimitsu Yamaguchi (*salt merchant, spy in Tokugawa's service*)  
Takashi Ebata (*Bonze, spy for the Oda Clan*)  
Fujio Tsuneta (*farmer*)  
Akihiko Sugizaki (*sniper at Noda Castle*)  
Naeko Nakamura, Sumire Aoki,  
Ai Matsubara, Kumi Nanase (*servants to Shingen's concubines*)  
Senkichi Omura (*Shingen Takeda's stable-boy*)  
Masatsugu Kuriyama (*muddy samurai*)

Japan 1980  
181 mins

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## 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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