



KUROSAWA

Sanjuro (Tsubaki Sanjuro)

Akira Kurosawa's *Sanjuro* ends with what must surely be the briefest, and most breathtaking, duel in all cinema. Two samurai swordsmen face up to each other, motionless, gazing into each other's eyes, for all of 20 seconds. Then... they draw; and from the chest of one of them there spouts a huge gout of blood. It's all over in barely a second.

What makes this dramatic lightning-bolt all the more startling is that it represents an abrupt shift of mood from everything that's preceded it. This moment apart, *Sanjuro* is the most light-hearted of all Kurosawa's excursions into the *jidai-geki* (period film) genre. It was a movie that he thoroughly enjoyed making, and completed more rapidly than any of his other mature films.

It was also a film made in response to popular demand. The previous year Kurosawa had scored a huge critical and commercial hit for his own production company with *Yojimbo*, which introduced the character calling himself Sanjuro (which means simply '30 years old'), the scruffy, mercenary, cynical *ronin* (masterless samurai) played by Toshiro Mifune.

The public had taken this maverick figure to their hearts and were eager for a sequel. Kurosawa had a story ready – one he'd prepared some time previously from a novel, *Peaceful Days*, by Shugoro Yamamoto (whose stories would also provide the source material for *Red Beard*, 1965, and *Dodes'ka-den*, 1970). The plot just needed tweaking to include the Sanjuro figure. Originally Kurosawa planned to assign the script to another director, his assistant Hiromichi Horikawa, to make, but then decided to take it on himself.

Strictly speaking, *Sanjuro* can't be called a 'sequel' to *Yojimbo*, since it seems to take place in a slightly earlier period of Japanese history. *Yojimbo* is exactly placed in the 1860s, the final years of the Tokugawa era, when the rigid social structure of *shogunate* Japan was breaking down. The period of *Sanjuro* isn't specified but appears to be set during a more socially stable period, maybe a few decades earlier.

It's altogether lighter in tone than its predecessor, a comedy of manners that spoofs many of the conventions of the *jidai-geki*. The original Japanese trailer kicks off with a jaunty, indeed almost farcical, tune. Much of the humour derives from the contrast between Sanjuro's practical, down-to-earth behaviour and the naivety of the group of nine clean-cut and callow young samurai to whom he reluctantly becomes guardian and mentor – a humorous treatment of the master-pupil theme that so often recurs in Kurosawa's films. With Mifune at his most feline, it's often like watching a lazy but potentially lethal tiger beset by a bunch of yapping puppies. Sanjuro yawns, scratches and tries to get a little sleep, only to be disturbed by the excitable youngsters as they dash about concocting hare-brained schemes.

Further comedy comes from the interplay between Sanjuro and the refined pair of court ladies he has to rescue from being kidnapped. Their well-bred surprise at his unconventional ways is matched by his barely concealed exasperation at their twittering gentility and insistence on following formal codes of politeness at all times, no matter what danger they're in. And there's a diverting running gag involving a captured warrior who finds his loyalty shifting to the side of his captors.

Tongue in cheek though it is, *Sanjuro* is made with all the fluid elegance of Kurosawa at the height of his powers, his scurrying swordsmen forming intricate visual patterns across the 'scope screen. And even at his most

playful, Kurosawa has serious points to make about Japanese society and its overwhelming urge towards social conformity. No matter how often Sanjuro tells his eager young acolytes to think for themselves and not judge by appearances and outward adherence to convention, they persist in acting mindlessly as a group, always looking for an assertive leader from whom they can take orders.

Being a samurai movie, *Sanjuro* naturally doesn't lack swordplay, but most of the violence appears almost bloodless – at least until that very last scene, when Kurosawa stages his startling switch of mood. Sanjuro, departing, finds himself confronted by the one man he respects: Muroto, chief swordsman for the villains (played by Tatsuya Nakadai, his nemesis in *Yojimbo*). Nothing Sanjuro can say will dissuade Muroto, who insists on fighting. And he dies, spectacularly.

Sanjuro rounds on the admiring youngsters. 'What was so great about that?' he snaps. 'Don't try to follow me or I'll kill you.' And off he strides to Masaru Sato's pulsing score, ending Kurosawa's lightest *jidai-geki* on a grim downbeat.

Philip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, 15 June 2022

The action of *Sanjuro* unfolds largely in the rooms and gardens of two adjoining villas. Against settings of picturesque domesticity, Mifune's shaggy, truculent samurai seems more anomalous than ever, a battered relic of the declining Shogunate, living from hand to mouth and full of contempt for the anaemic products of a new samurai generation. Analogies with modern trends in the West hardly need pointing out: *Sanjuro* is not quite Kurosawa's *True Grit*, but in the isolation of their age and calling Mifune's samurai and Wayne's lawman are both seen as reluctant exiles.

Sanjuro is nostalgic in other ways: Kurosawa makes frequent use of the wipe as narrative punctuation, stages his telephoto swordfights with traditionally clinical violence (Mifune once demolishes twenty men with two precision blows apiece), and again lets the hero shamble grumpily off at the end threatening to kill anyone who follows him. Especially familiar, though, is the choreographic formalism of Kurosawa's style, making an entertainingly quaint chorus of Sanjuro's hangdog disciples (their concealed heads popping up in unison from beneath the floorboards, or following their leader in an obsequious crocodile as he cases the Chamberlain's villa), and giving a hilarious unity to the demure utterances of the kidnapped official's wife and daughter. Escaping over a high wall, they are forbidden by etiquette from using Sanjuro's back as a step; only his acceptance of their elaborately courteous apology allows the flight to continue.

Ironically, these two paragons of Oriental civility alone have the power to cow Mifune: 'You glitter too much,' says the wife, and in answer to Mifune's baffled stare explains, 'You are an unsheathed sword. A really good sword remains in its scabbard.' The proverb evidently hits home, for Mifune quotes it sternly to the young samurai as they applaud his killing of Muroto in the final duel; and the hint of abdication in his world-weary walk, as he shambles off up the road with a characteristic shrug of the shoulders, suggests Kurosawa's intention of wrapping up both this film and its predecessor *Yojimbo* on a note of mellow downbeat finality. The mood is in keeping with a film structured round diplomatic intrigue, double-crossings and elaborately colourful ruses rather than the outright physicality of *Yojimbo*. The Tohoscope photography is equally in keeping, alternating carefully framed medium shot interiors with the beautifully graded monochrome of the garden scenes. The lyrical sequence of the camellias floating downstream to signal the attack is an apt correlative for the most autumnal of Kurosawa's Japanese Westerns.

Nigel Andrews, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1971

SANJURO (TSUBAKI SANJURO)

Director: Akira Kurosawa

©: Toho Co. Ltd.

Production Companies: Kurosawa Productions, Toho Co. Ltd.

Producers: Tomoyuki Tanaka, Ryuzo Kikushima

Production Supervisor: Hiroshi Nezu

Production Assistant: Shigeru Kishima

Assistant Directors: Shiro Moritani, Masanobu Deme, Yoichi Matsue, Yoshikumi Wada

Script Supervisor: Teruyo Nogami

Screenplay: Ryuzo Kikushima, Hideo Oguni, Akira Kurosawa

Based on the novel by: Shugoro Yamamoto

Directors of Photography: Fukuzo Koizumi, Takao Saito

Lighting: Ichiro Inohara

Assistant Lighting: Isao Hara

Stills Photography: Masao Fukuda

Assistant Editor: Reiko Kaneko

Art Director: Yoshiro Muraki

Chief Assistant Director: Shiro Moritani

Assistant Directors: Masanobu Deme, Yoichi Matsue, Yoshikumi Wada

Assistant Art Director: Tsuneo Shimura

Costumes: Yoshiro Muraki, Shoji Kurihara

Hair: Yoshiko Matsumoto, Junjiro Yamada

Music: Masaru Sato

Sound: Wataru Konuma, Hisashi Shimonaga

Sound Assistant: Jin Sashida

Mixing: Hisashi Shimonaga

Sound Effects: Ichiro Minawa

Adviser on Swordplay: Ryu Kuze

Transportation: Isamu Miwano

Cast

Toshiro Mifune (*Sanjuro Tsubaki*)

Tatsuya Nakadai (*Hanbei Muroto*)

Yûzô Kayama (*Iori Izaka, leader of the samurai*)

Akihiko Hirata (*Terada, samurai*)

Kunie Tanaka (*Yasukawa, samurai*)

Hiroshi Tachikawa (*Kahara, samurai*)

Tatsuhiko Hari (*younger Morishima, samurai*)

Tatsuyoshi Ehara (*Sekiguchi, samurai*)

Yoshio Tsuchiya (*Hirose, samurai*)

Akira Kubo (*elder Morishima, samurai*)

Kenzo Matsui (*samurai*)

Takashi Shimura (*Kurofujii*)

Kamatari Fujiwara (*Takebayashi*)

Masao Shimizu (*Kikui*)

Yûnosuke Itô (*Mutsuta, the chamberlain*)

Takako Irie (*Mutsuta's wife*)

Reiko Dan (*Chidori, Mutsuta's daughter*)

Keiju Kobayashi (*Kimura, the spy*)

Toranosuke Ogawa (*Sandyu, Kurofujii's steward*)

Sachio Sakai (*Ashigaru*)

Toshiko Higuchi (*Koiso*)

Yutaka Sada (*Kikui samurai*)

Shin Otomo

Japan 1962©

96 mins

KUROSAWA

Stray Dog (Nora Inu)

Wed 1 Feb 20:35; Mon 13 Feb 18:10

Drunken Angel (Yoidore Tenshi)

Thu 2 Feb 18:20; Fri 10 Feb 20:40

The Silent Duel (Shizukanaru Kettô)

Thu 2 Feb 20:40; Sat 11 Feb 18:40

Sanshiro Sugata (Sugata Sanshirô)

Fri 3 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by Ian Haydn Smith, season co-curator); Sun 12 Feb 15:50

Sanshiro Sugata Part Two (Zoku Sugata Sanshirô)

Fri 3 Feb 20:45; Sun 12 Feb 18:20

The Gathering Storm: Kurosawa Study Day

Sat 4 Feb 12:00

Living (Ikiru)

Sat 4 Feb 17:50; Wed 15 Feb 20:15

Kurosawa and Shakespeare, Adaptation and Reinvention: An illustrated talk by Adrian Wootton

Sun 5 Feb 15:15

Ran

Sun 5 Feb 17:30 (+ intro by Adrian Wootton, CEO of Film London and film curator); Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Sat 25 Feb 17:20

I Live in Fear (Ikimono no Kiroku)

Mon 6 Feb 18:10; Mon 13 Feb 20:40

Dreams (Yume)

Wed 8 Feb 20:30; Sun 26 Feb 15:30

Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-jô)

Sun 12 Feb 13:00; Fri 17 Feb 20:40; Tue 21 Feb 18:10

Dersu Uzala

Thu 16 Feb 18:10 (+ intro by Ian Haydn Smith, season co-curator); Mon 27 Feb 20:10 (+ intro by Doug Weir, BFI Technical Delivery Manager)

Yojimbo (Yôjinbô)

Sat 18 Feb 20:45; Thu 23 Feb 20:15 (+ intro by Asif Kapadia, season co-curator)

Rhapsody in August (Hachigatsu no Kyoshikoku)

Sun 19 Feb 18:30; Sat 25 Feb 12:40

Mâdadayo

Mon 20 Feb 20:20; Tue 28 Feb 18:00

Philosophical Screens: Throne of Blood

Tue 21 Feb 20:10

A.K.

Wed 22 Feb 20:50; Sat 25 Feb 20:45

In partnership with



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

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

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

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

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with Sight and Sound, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info:

sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk



Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780