



KUROSAWA

Sanshiro Sugata (Sugata Sanshiro)

+ intro by Ian Haydn Smith, season co-curator (Friday 3 February only)

Kurosawa's accomplished debut is inspired by the life of 19th-century judo pioneer, Saigo Shiro. The wilful Sanshiro travels to the city to learn jujitsu, but is taken under the wing of a judo master, rapidly becoming one of the sport's leading lights. The use of screen wipes and weather as a tonal device are just two of the elements used here that would become trademarks of Kurosawa's style.

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Akira Kurosawa often named *Drunken Angel* (1948) as the first of his films where 'I was finally myself,' adding that 'in earlier films I was never allowed to express myself properly'. It was also the first of his films to star Toshiro Mifune, who went on to appear in all but one of his next sixteen films, and the first to be scored by Kurosawa's friend, the composer Fumio Hayasaka. So it's perhaps hardly surprising if the films that Kurosawa directed prior to *Drunken Angel* have been largely ignored, written off as mere prentice work.

But for anyone attracted by Kurosawa's films, it would be a mistake to dismiss these six features as devoid of interest. They may well seem immature, placed beside *Ikiru* (1952), *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Throne of Blood* (1957) or *Yojimbo* (1961); but in them we can watch a major filmmaker working out his ideas and techniques, and exploring themes that would come to fruition a few years later. Also it's fascinating to see him applying himself to genres that, once established as a major director, he would never revisit, such as a semi-documentary propaganda piece (*The Most Beautiful*) or a sentimental comedy (*One Wonderful Sunday*).

In 1936, at the age of 26, Kurosawa joined PCL Studios (later to become Toho) as assistant to the director Kajiro Yamamoto. He was lucky in his assignment; rather than treat his assistants as mindless dogsbodies, as did most Japanese directors of the period, Yamamoto believed in consulting them, helping them learn and encouraging independent thought. By 1941 Kurosawa had become Yamamoto's chief assistant, often directing second-unit work, and was writing scripts in the hope of being allowed to direct them.

He succeeded in 1942, when he saw an advertisement for a new novel called *Sugata Sanshiro* by Tsuneo Tomita, about the creation of the martial art of judo in the 1880s, and how it supplanted the more ancient art of jujutsu. Kurosawa persuaded the studio to buy the rights and let him direct. *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943) became his debut film, though all we have is a truncated version. A pre-credit title from Toho, dated 1952, notes that 1,845 ft of the film (roughly 20 per cent) was cut 'to comply with the government's wartime entertainment policies' and that the excised footage has been lost.

This probably suggests that Japan's military government found the film insufficiently loud in patriotic pronouncements. True, the chief villain, jujutsu champion Gennosuke Higaki (played by Ryonosuke Tsukigata), generally

appears wearing western clothes, but beyond that there's a refreshing lack of propaganda in Kurosawa's first directorial outing. Nor does he seem much concerned with differences in technique between the two disciplines; as always, it's the differing mindsets that interest him. The jutsu fighters are shown as aggressive, impatient, scornful, where the judo practitioners are soft-spoken and patient, treating their opponents with respect.

Pointers to Kurosawa's later work abound. Already he was using his favourite device for transition between scenes, the fast horizontal wipe, to energise and speed up the narrative. The theme of discipleship, frequent in his films (*Seven Samurai*, for example, or *Red Beard*, 1965) and perhaps reflecting his own debt to Yamamoto, makes its first outing here in the relationship between the young Sugata (Susumu Fujita) and his *sensei* or mentor, the judo master Shogoro Yano (Denjiro Okochi).

And the final open-air confrontation between hero and villain, its windswept setting typical of Kurosawa's taste for climatic extremes, foreshadows the climax of *Sanjuro* (1962).

Philip Kemp, extract of booklet essay for Early Kurosawa DVD box-set (BFI, 2011)

Kurosawa on 'Sanshiro Sugata'

I remember the first time I said 'cut-it' was as though it was not my own voice at all. From the second time on it was me all right. When I think of this first picture I remember most that I had a good time making it. And at this period it was hard to have a good time making films because it was wartime and you weren't allowed to say anything worth saying. Back then everyone thought that the real Japanese-style film should be as simple as possible. I disagreed and got away with disagreeing – that much I could say. Still, I was anything but sure of myself. I remember doing a scene with the heroine Yukiko Todoroki, and we decided together how it should be done. I remember when I saw an advertisement for the novel this film was based on, I intuitively thought it would be right for me. When it came out I went to the producer's house and asked him to buy the rights. He did so and two days later every major studio was wanting it. It was ideal for an entertainment film and that was about all we were allowed to make back in 1943.

I remember the first day I met Shimura [Takashi Shimura was later the woodcutter in *Rashomon*, the hero of *Ikiru*, and early became a member of the Kurosawa 'group'] – he was standing on the lawn of the studio and I didn't recognise him. He was wearing a very old and very shabby hat and I remember thinking that the hat suited him extraordinarily well. At the same time I met Fujita [Susumu Fujita was the hero of this film, and later appeared in *The Hidden Fortress* and other Kurosawa films] and Ryunosuke Tsunagata who was playing the villain. I remember that the critics said he overacted and stole the show. That is not true. He did not overact. He certainly stole the show, however. I told him to. I was much more interested in his character than in the hero.

Akira Kurosawa interviewed by Donald Richie, *Sight and Sound*, July 1964

SANSHIRO SUGATA (SUGATA SANSHIRO)

Director: Akira Kurosawa

Production Company: Toho Co., Ltd.

Producer: Keiji Matsuzaki

Screenplay: Akira Kurosawa

Author of the Original Work: Tsuneo Tomita

Director of Photography: Akira Mimura

Lighting: Masaki Onuma

Editors: Toshio Goto, Akira Kurosawa

Art Director: Masao Totsuka

Music: Seichi Suzuki

Sound: Tomohisa Higuchi

Cast

Denjiro Okochi (*Shogoro Yano*)

Susumu Fujita (*Sanshiro Sugata*)

Akitake Kôno (*Yoshima*)

Takashi Shimura (*Hansuke Murai*)

Yukiko Todoroki (*Sayo*)

Ryunosuke Tsukigata (*Gennosuke Higaki*)

Akira Nakamura (*Toranosuki Niiseki*)

Yoshio Kosugi (*Saburo Momma*)

Ranko Hani (*Osumi*)

Kunio Mita (*Kohei Tsuzaki*)

Sugisaku Aoyama (*Tsunetami Iimura*)

Soshi Kiyokawa (*Yujiro Toda*)

Michisaburo Segawa (*Hatta*)

Ichirô Sugai (*Police Chief*)

Kokuten Kodo (*Priest*)

Hajime Hikari (*Torakichi*)

Eizaburo Sakauchi (*Nemoto*)

Japan 1943

80 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

Red Beard (Akahige)

Sat 11 Feb 15:20 (+ intro by Ian Haydn Smith, season co-curator);

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

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