



**KUROSAWA**

# Living (Ikiru)

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

This post-war drama, recently adapted by Kazuo Ishiguro as *Living*, remains one of Kurosawa's best loved films. Kanji Watanabe has spent his life as an administrator within the Japanese's government's bureaucratic system. A medical diagnosis radically shifts his worldview and finds him reassessing what is important in life. Loosely inspired by Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and featuring a heartfelt central performance by Takashi Shimura, *Ikiru* is a work of profound humanism.

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## Gillies MacKinnon on Kurosawa's 'Living'

I first saw Kurosawa's *Ikiru* at the Glasgow art school film society, sitting beside my pal Gerry McGowan who cracked loud jokes all the way through a succession of Bergman, Visconti and Pasolini films. I was just beginning to realise that movies were not only about action but also about stories which can get inside you and alter your way of thinking. I watched *Ikiru* again last winter during the dead of night, sheltering in a trailer on the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia where I was directing Steve Martin's screenplay *A Simple Twist of Fate*. Outside, the special effects team struggled chaotically to construct a snow scene with gallons of freezing detergent. Inside the trailer, I was once again caught up in Kurosawa's simplicity of story-telling and the film's unselfconscious quality of acting.

Opening with the diffuse image of an X-ray plate, we immediately know that the theme of the film is death. Kanji Watanabe (played by Takashi Shimura), a senior clerk of the Citizens Section, has spent thirty heartless years at his desk. The narrator tells us that although he walks around, he is as good as dead. Meanwhile, groups of desperate women, who want to reclaim an area of wasteground to make a children's playground, are shuffled from department to department in a painfully true comic sequence which includes a pest control clerk idly swatting flies.

Watanabe visits the doctor. In the waiting room a patient foresees that the old man has cancer. Gripped by fear, Watanabe changes his seat and turns his face away from the man towards the camera, creating one of the most memorable, recurring images – his large, troubled, soulful face staring into space as events unfold around him.

As the doctors discuss Watanabe's case among themselves, one of them asks the central question of the drama – faced with six months to live, what would you do? Watanabe is shown walking alone, stunned. A mute soundtrack makes us feel as if we are inside his head and then, suddenly, the noise of traffic explodes and the camera pulls out to reveal the street as vehicles wipe through the frame and obscure him. This is one of the more elaborate set-ups in the film. For the most part, *Ikiru* leaves a dramatic visual impression because the photography complements the acting without unsettling the scene with tricky camera moves – the looks on faces, the postures, the movement of bodies around rooms and streets are the images that stay in the mind.

Kurosawa cuts hard into scenes to great effect. In a flashback sequence, Watanabe reviews the losses and failures of his life, ending with him slumping

down into a chair – cut to him slumping down in real time in a continuous motion, then cut to an elevator descending, which has the effect of pulling the viewer down to Watanabe's state of mind.

Watanabe is unable to die because he doesn't know what he has been living for. With half his life savings in his pocket, he asks a drinking partner to show him how to have the good time he has never known. So follows a wild, manic night in recently westernised, neon-lit streets as this naive old man tries hard to live. This includes him buying a white hat which later becomes something of a running gag, prompting various reactions to the 'new' Watanabe. Tumbling from nightclub to nightclub, Watanabe's frenzied mood suddenly changes as he stuns the revellers into silence by singing – from some deep, sorrowful place inside himself – 'Life is so short, fall in love dear maiden while your lips are still red for there will be no tomorrow.' *Ikiru* is worth seeing for this scene alone.

In a later sequence he befriends a vivacious young woman, and there follows a hazardous shot where she excitedly runs into the street towards two oncoming buses. This is the only moment in the film where I feel separated from the action as suddenly you become aware of the camera operator who must have had his ears clipped by the buses.

Watanabe become obsessed with turning the dump into a children's playground. Combining super-human zeal with a show of humility (which makes the term passive-aggressive seem an understatement), he manages to overcome the inertia of county hall petty bureaucracy and to ignore the threats of gangsters. He then dies, and the remainder of the film brilliantly follows events at his funeral. I love the way in which the characters become caught up in powerful emotional responses *en masse* – for example, the group of mourning women who pour into the room like wailing banshees and the previously cynical colleagues who collapse in a wave of repentance.

I have wondered how the story would be interpreted by Hollywood if it was remade with a first rate actor such as Jack Lemmon or Burt Lancaster. I suspect the complexity of the flashback structure would be the first thing to go. *Ikiru* is the story of a man trying to experience life in the few months he has left, and finding the answer in the creation of a children's playground. The sentimental pitfalls for any modern version are obvious (although, I suspect an earlier Hollywood movie of, let's say, the 50s might have been closer in spirit to Kurosawa). It's easy to knock Hollywood with its bright-eyed executives generating scrolls of notes, the formulaic plots and its obsession with previews which – with the cold-blooded influence of those who market movies – ask audiences if there is anything that they don't like. Even so, I can't help thinking that this might be one film that could survive a remake, but only if it could be told with the honesty and innocence of the original. The question is have we become too cynical to make this kind of simply-told human story?

**Gillies MacKinnon, *Sight and Sound*, November 1994**

## **Akira Kurosawa on 'Living'**

What I remember best here is the long wake sequence that ends the film, where – from time to time – we see scenes in the hero's later life. Originally I wanted music all under this long section. I talked it over with Hayasaka and we decided on it and he wrote the score. Yet when it came time to dub, no matter how we did it, the scenes and music simply did not fit. So I thought about it for a long time and then took all the music out. I remember how disappointed Hayasaka was. He just sat there, not saying anything, and the rest of the day he tried to be cheerful. I was sorry I had to do it, yet I had to. There is no way now of telling him how I felt – he is gone.

He was a fine man. It was as though he (with his glasses) were blind and I was deaf. We worked so well together because one’s weakness was the other’s strength. We had been together ten years and then he died. It was not only my own loss – it was music’s loss as well. You don’t meet a person like that twice in your life.

[Kurosawa has mentioned elsewhere the genesis of the idea that resulted in *Ikiru*: Occasionally I think of my death... then I think, how could I ever bear to take a final breath, while living a life like this, how could I leave it? There is, I feel, so much more for me to do – I keep feeling I have lived so little yet. Then I become thoughtful, but not sad. It was from such a feeling that *Ikiru* arose.]

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

LIVING (IKIRU)

Director: Akira Kurosawa  
Production Company: Toho Co. Ltd.  
Producer: Sojiro Motoki  
Assistant Directors: Hiromichi Horikawa, Sadanobu Marubayashi, Teruo Maru  
Screenplay: Shinobu Hashimoto, Hideo Oguni, Akira Kurosawa  
Director of Photography: Asakazu Nakai  
Lighting: Shigeru Mori  
Editor: Koichi Iwashita  
Art Director: So Matsuyama  
Music: Fumio Hayasaka  
Sound Recording: Fumio Yanoguchi  
Sound Effects: Ichiro Minawa

Cast

Takashi Shimura (*Kanji Watanabe*)  
Nobuo Kaneko (*Mitsuo, Kanji’s son*)  
Kyoko Seki (*Kazue, Mitsuo’s wife*)  
Miki Odagiri (*Toyo Odagiri*)  
Makoto Kobori (*Kiichi, Kanji’s elder brother*)  
Kumeko Urabe (*Tatsu, Kiichi’s wife*)  
Nobuo Nakamura (*deputy mayor*)  
Kamatari Fujiwara (*Ono, sub-section chief*)

Minosuke Yamada (*Saito, subordinate clerk*)  
Haruo Tanaka (*Sakai, assistant*)  
Bokuzen Hidari (*O-hara, assistant*)  
Minoru Chiaki (*Noguchi*)  
Shinichi Himori (*Kimura, assistant*)  
Yûnosuke Itô (*novelist*)  
Yoshie Minami (*the maid*)  
Kazuo Abe (*city councillor*)  
Masao Shimizu (*doctor*)  
Isao Kimura (*intern*)  
Atsushi Watanabe (*patient*)  
Yatsuko Tanami (*hostess*)  
Fuyuki Murakami (*newspaperman*)  
Seiji Miyaguchi (*gang boss*)  
Daisuke Katô (*gang member*)  
Kin Sugai, Eiko Miyoshi, Fumiko Homma (*housewives*)  
Ichiro Chiba (*policeman*)  
Toranosuke Ogawa (*park section chief*)  
Tomoo Nagai, Hirayoshi Aono (*reporters*)  
Akira Tani (*old man in bar*)  
Toshiyuki Ichimura (*cabaret pianist*)

Japan 1952  
141 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

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);  
Sun 26 Feb 17:25

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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