



**KUROSAWA**

# Red Beard (Akahige)

+ intro by Ian Haydn Smith, season co-curator (Saturday 11 February only)

Kurosawa's last black and white film was his final collaboration with Mifune. It might not be one of their best-known works, but it is one of their richest. Adapted from the short stories of Shogoro Yamamoto and drawing from Dostoevsky's *Humiliated and Insulted*, it tells the story of the combative relationship between a doctor and his trainee at a rural clinic. The film features only one swordfight – albeit one of the most thrilling he directed – but in exploring themes of humanism and existentialism *Red Beard* evinces the depth and detail of the 19th-century Russian novels that Kurosawa adored.

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The popular image of Kurosawa is of a director of samurai movies. People who know his work well tend to protest at this, pointing out that he made many other films, several with modern-day settings. Yet in a sense, the popular judgement isn't wrong. The figure of the samurai – or, rather, that of the *ronin*, the masterless samurai who has to carve out his own path, frequently in the teeth of convention – stands at the heart of almost all his movies. Often literally so – the swordsmen who come to the aid of the peasants in *Seven Samurai* are *ronin*, as of course is the scruffy sword-for-hire hero of *Yojimbo*. And contemporary figures like the obsessive young cop in *Stray Dog* or the company executive seeking revenge for his father's death in *The Bad Sleep Well* (Kurosawa's updating of *Hamlet*) also fit the template.

Kurosawa's perennial concern is with Japanese society and its fatal urge towards social conformity – authority obeyed without question. Hence his predilection for the *ronin* figure – the maverick who values practical results over etiquette and follows his own judgement with no concern for outward show. The gruff, inspirational Dr Niide at the centre of *Red Beard* is a *ronin* within his own profession, a man who marches to the beat of a different drum. As played by Mifune (in his last film for Kurosawa), he's a figure of overwhelming authority, brushing aside the accepted pieties of medical orthodoxy. (For old times' sake Kurosawa even tosses in a brief action sequence where Niide demolishes a gang of heavies, with excruciatingly bone-crunching sound effects.) Though a non-Japanese outsider might not guess it, *Red Beard* and *Sanjuro* are set around the same period: the end of the Tokugawa shogunate in the mid-19th century, when Japan was being forcibly opened to the west and the rigidly stratified society that had prevailed for three centuries was beginning to crumble. Meticulous and perfectionist as ever, Kurosawa had an entire small town constructed for the film, which took two years to shoot.

**Philip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, November 2003**

Kurosawa's monumental film, two years in the making, has inevitably invited comparisons with American hospital soap opera: Red Beard the respected master of his clinic, with a simple but essentially sound philosophy and little time for the new-fangled ideas of tiro medical graduates. In fact, Red Beard and Dr Gillespie are as alike as Raymond Massey and Toshiro Mifune. Kurosawa's canvas is Dickensian, and his characters are sketched with no more profundity than those of *Oliver Twist*. But psychological subtlety is not his purpose. He is not, like Ray or Olmi or Forman, a chronicler of human minutiae; his strokes, like those of the samurai's sword, are broad and

sweeping, as precisely and simply effective as the wipe he uses as an editing device.

On a superficial level Kurosawa deals, like the Westerns he admires, in blacks and whites. And there are moments in this film, as there were in *High and Low*, which come near to being trite, even sentimental: when, for instance, the girl rescued from the brothel wipes the young doctor's fevered brow with snow she has scraped from the window; or when, having listened to the story of the wheelwright who has worked himself to death in the clinic because he thought that his wife's death had ended his share of happiness, the doctor decides at last to put on his hospital uniform and devote himself to good works. Here, as elsewhere, the soundtrack swells with a parody of Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy'.

One's immediate reaction is cynicism; and this is precisely why Kurosawa made the film, as Donald Richie has pointed out. The proposition that good begets good openly invites ridicule in a cynical world; but that Kurosawa is saying, is the cynical world's loss. As in *The Lower Depths* and *High and Low*, we are introduced to a hell on earth out of which there gradually emerges a hope for the inmates.

The clinic is under-budgeted, the patients are underfed; they are slum people, the new doctor is told, 'full of fleas' and the sense of smell is almost tangible in the crowded images of the patients huddled together against the cold. The good is there, but buried; it needs the infinite patience of a Red Beard to bring it out. 'Any doctor can help them,' Yasumoto says of the clinic's patients after his interest has been aroused by the hysterical woman kept apart from the rest because she is a special case. But he learns his first lesson when the woman nearly kills him, just as later he watches fascinated as Red Beard persists in his efforts to get the brothel girl to take medicine and simply by his persistence breaks through her bitterness and persuades her to take it. Yasumoto at first sees only the horror of the dying man's spasms. But like Red Beard, he gradually learns to look beyond it, to come to terms with the difficult truth that pity is not enough; that like the seven samurai and like Red Beard, he must also go out and do battle against evil.

Kurosawa's theme is thus the reverse of sentimentality because he directly challenges us to be cynical and then shows us that our cynicism is as hollow as sending a cheque to a charity before settling down to a good dinner: the doctors in the clinic don't have coal for their fires because it is more important for the patients' fires to be kept going. This is not the easiest of propositions to put across, but Kurosawa manages it magnificently.

The film is a fresco of details, and here one can only mention a few of them (a whole essay could be devoted, for instance, to the use Kurosawa makes of natural sound or the part that the music plays in the film). The style is deceptively simple, and the film is studded with examples of Kurosawa's genius for composition within a frame, like the scene in which Yasumoto and the mad woman are seen at opposite ends of the frame with just the flicker of a candle lighting the central area of blackness. Here the camera is fixed; elsewhere it describes sweeping arcs of movement (the scene in which Red Beard suddenly erupts into violence, breaking the bones of a dozen opponents before mumbling to himself 'I'm afraid I went a bit too far'). Again, single images of stunning beauty (the extraordinary depth of focus in some of the flashback sequences (the haunting weirdness of the hundreds of little bells set ringing by a gust of wind in the market-place) are counterpointed by long scenes in which the camera lingers long enough over suffering for us to feel it (the old man dying, his body twitching at the bottom of the frame; the operation on an injured girl, with the camera fixed on the girl's legs tethered to a wall). Like Yasumoto, we are forced to watch; and like him we learn a little more about ourselves.

**David Wilson, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1969**

## RED BEARD (AKAHIGE)

Director: Akira Kurosawa

Production Companies: Kurosawa Productions, Toho Co. Ltd.

Producers: Ryuzo Kikushima, Tomoyuki Tanaka

Unit Production Manager: Hiroshi Nezu

Production Assistant: Shigeru Kishima

Assistant Directors: Shiro Moritani, Masanobu Deme, Yoichi Matsue, Kenjiro Omori

Script Supervisor: Teruyo Nogami

Casting: Yuichi Yoshitake

Screenplay: Ryuzo Kikushima, Hideo Oguni, Masato Ide, Akira Kurosawa

Based on the novel Akahige shinryo tan by: Shogoro Yamamoto

Directors of Photography: Asakazu Nakai, Takao Saito

Lighting: Hiromitsu Mori

Assistant Lighting: Fumiyoshi Hara

Assistant Cameraman: Kazutami Hara

Stills Photography: Masao Fukuda

Assistant Editor: Reiko Kaneko

Art Director: Yoshiro Muraki

Assistant Art Director: Nozomi Fukusako

Costumes: Yoshiko Samejima

Hair: Yoshiko Matsumoto, Junjiro Yamada

Music: Masaru Sato

Sound Recording: Shin Watarai

Sound Assistant: Jin Sashida

Sound Mixing: Hisashi Shimonaga

Sound Effects: Ichiro Minawa

Transportation: Yoshio Sekine

### Cast

Toshiro Mifune (*Dr Kyojio Niide, 'Red Beard'*)

Yûzô Kayama (*Dr Noboru Yasumoto*)

Yoshio Tsuchiya (*Dr Handayu Mori*)

Tatsuyoshi Ehara (*Genzo Tsugawa*)

Reiko Dan (*Osugi*)

Kyôko Kagawa (*the mad woman*)

Kamatari Fujiwara (*Rokusuke*)

Akemi Negishi (*Okuni*)

Tsutomu Yamazaki (*Sahachi*)

Miyuki Kuwano (*Onaka*)

Eijirô Tono (*Goheiji*)

Takashi Shimura (*Tokubei Izumiya*)

Terumi Niki (*Otoyo*)

Haruko Sugimura (*Kin*)

Yoko Naito (*Masae*)

Ken Mitsuda (*Masae's father*)

Kinuyo Tanaka (*Yasumoto's mother*)

Chishu Ryu (*Yasumoto's father*)

Yoshitaka Zushi (*Choji*)

Reiko Nanao (*Otoku*)

Koji Mitsui (*Heikichi*)

Eijirô Yanagi (*the madwoman's father*)

Nobuo Chiba (*Matsudaira*)

Yoko Fujiyama (*Chigusa*)

Imari Tsuji (*Okatsu*)

Akiko Nomura (*Ofuku*)

Sue Mitobe (*Otake*)

Kin Sugai (*Choji's mother*)

Michiko Araki (*woman owner of brothel*)

Bokuzen Hidari (*patient A*)

Atsushi Watanabe (*patient B*)

Yasuzo Ogawa (*businessman*)

Yutaka Sada, Ikio Sawamura, Fumiko Homma (*residents*)

Miyoko Nakamura (*Okoto*)

Akira Nishimura (*chief retainer*)

Shoko Kazimi (*Masae's mother*)

Chisato Aoki, Kyoko Kurisu, Yukiko Yanagishita, Toshiko Fukai (*prostitutes*)

Keiko Tomita (*girl on street*)

Taiko Shoji, Shoichi Hirose, Hiroyoshi Yamaguchi (*thugs*)

Masanobu Okubo (*Choji's father*)

Fujio Tsuneta, Tasuo Araki, Hiroshi Tanaka, Toru Ibuki, Mitsuga Uni,

Hiroto Kimura, Shu Komuro, Ryu Kuze (*thugs*)

Japan 1965

185 mins

## KUROSAWA

### Red Beard (Akahige)

Sat 11 Feb 15:20 (+ intro by Ian Haydn Smith, season co-curator); Sun 26 Feb 17:25

### The Silent Duel (Shizukanaru Kettô)

Sat 11 Feb 18:40

### Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-jô)

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

### Sanshiro Sugata (Sugata Sanshirô)

Sun 12 Feb 15:50

### Sanshiro Sugata Part Two (Zoku Sugata Sanshirô)

Sun 12 Feb 18:20

### Stray Dog (Nora Inu)

Mon 13 Feb 18:10

### I Live in Fear (Ikimono no Kiroku)

Mon 13 Feb 20:40

### Living (Ikiru)

Wed 15 Feb 20:15

### 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

### Ran

Sat 25 Feb 17:20

### Dreams (Yume)

Sun 26 Feb 15:30

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