



**KUROSAWA**

# Dersu Uzala

*Introduced by Ian Haydn Smith, season co-curator (Thursday 16 February)  
and by Doug Weir, BFI Technical Delivery Manager (Monday 27 February)*

From *Rashomon* (1950) to *Yojimbo* (1961), Akira Kurosawa's run of critically acclaimed post-war films made him an international phenomenon, but a subsequent attempt to break into Hollywood in the late 1960s proved disastrous. Following an unceremonious exit from the American-Japanese production *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), and the commercial failure of his attempted homecoming rebound *Dodes'ka-den* (1970), the director reached the nadir of his career, and even attempted suicide. Yet, an invitation from the Soviet production company Mosfilm would lead to Kurosawa travelling to Siberia to direct *Dersu Uzala* (1975), the success of which would revive the filmmaker's fortunes.

*Dersu Uzala* is the adaptation of a 1923 memoir by Russian explorer Vladimir Arsenyev about his exploration of the far-east Russian frontier and encounter with a native Nanai trapper – Dersu Uzala. Captain Arsenyev and his company are conducting a topographical survey of the Sikhote-Alin mountain range when they come across Dersu. Immediately taken with the wise and good-natured tribesman, he asks him to become their tour guide. Dersu's resourcefulness and skills as a hunter proves invaluable to the troops, and on more than one occasion he saves the captain's life.

Dersu accompanies the men for several months before they have to part ways. The party continues the survey without him, and Arsenyev, saddened by his departure, spends the next five years hoping to run into his old friend. Eventually they are reunited and Dersu rejoins the mission. However, there is a change in the old hunter. Once a crack shot with a rifle, he fails to hit an attacking tiger, and it soon becomes clear that his advanced age and failing eyesight would hamper his ability to survive in the wilderness.

This simple, obscure tale might seem like a curio in the oeuvre of a filmmaker best known for his stylised samurai period dramas (*jidaigeki*), but in fact Kurosawa had a longstanding affinity for Russian literature. From his youth he had been obsessed with the likes of Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, and had previously adapted two Russian stories into films: *The Idiot* (1951), based on the Dostoevsky novel, and *The Lower Depths* (1957), an adaptation of a play by the dramatist Maxim Gorky. Both films are expressive of the contemplative and existential style of Russian storytelling and serve as precedents for *Dersu Uzala*'s narrative minimalism.

For *The Idiot* and *The Lower Depths*, Kurosawa swapped the Russian names and settings for Japanese ones; no such transposition was necessary for *Dersu Uzala* though, as he was granted unprecedented access by the Kremlin to film on location in the Siberian Taiga, using a Russian cast and crew; Dersu is played by Siberian actor Maxim Munzuk.

Beyond lending authenticity to the story, the specific cultural and geographic peculiarities of the story are not so easily transported to a Japanese context as the other two. This story of an unlikely friendship between a refined, educated European and an indigenous, nomadic Asian man is set against the immense backdrop of the Siberian hinterlands. Over the five-year expedition, Arsenyev and company experience the changing scenes and seasons of these unexplored lands. We see them toil from golden morning to deep red sunset, shelter from heavy rain, wade through rushing rivers and trek across snow-laden thick forests.

Then, there is that unforgettable scene in which Arsenyev and Dersu – having strayed from the rest of the party – are stranded in a desolate, snowy marshland, with John Ford-style extreme wide shots deepening their sense of isolation. The frozen expanse is suddenly engulfed by a blizzard, and the two men struggle to survive against the overwhelming force of nature. Here, especially, Kurosawa masterfully captures the sheer scale, beauty and terror of the region.

It's tempting to hypothesise that the Kremlin's support of Kurosawa was intended as an act of Cold War one-upmanship against the Americans who had scorned him. It has also been suggested that the film contains anti-Chinese undertones (relations between the two communist nations were tense at the time it was made). Political ploy or not, the film – despite a mediocre reception in Japan – performed well internationally, selling 20 million tickets in Russia and grossing \$1.2 million in the US and Canada. It would win two awards at the Moscow International Film Festival, as well as the 1976 Academy Award for best foreign language film.

*Dersu Uzala* was a recuperative exercise for Kurosawa, a labour of love that breathed new life into the dispirited director. With this second wind – and the support of such benefactors as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and Francis Ford Coppola – Kurosawa would mount such lavish productions as *Kagemusha* (1980), *Ran* (1985) and *Dreams* (1990) and move into the triumphant final stage of his career.

**Derin Fadina, bfi.org.uk, 8 February 2023**

More Russian than Japanese in its tendency towards boy scout uplift – Kurosawa seems to have adapted himself to Arsenyev rather than effect a mutation in his source material as he did earlier with Gorky, Dostoevsky and Shakespeare – *Dersu Uzala* is rescued from the reefs of sentimentality by direction as calmly matter-of-fact in its elegiacs as the best of John Ford (unmistakably echoed in the scene where Arsenyev mourns over Dersu's forest grave), and by Maksim Munzuk's marvellously apt performance as the old hunter.

Wizened but sturdily rounded, a primitive Charlie Chan to the life as he deduces the story of an entire day's happenings from a footprint, a shred of cloth and a barkless patch of tree-trunk, his Dersu effortlessly supplies the dimension so signally lacking in Sydney Pollack's *Jeremiah Johnson*: the sense, as William O. Douglas puts it, referring to the mountain men of America's West, that 'only those who return to the elemental world can know its beauty and grandeur – and man's essential unity with it'.

At first merely quaintly amusing as he apostrophises a log that is crackling too loudly in the fire ('All you can do is talk!') and promptly teaches it a lesson by extinguishing its flame, Dersu's insistence on viewing not only all creatures as fellow men, but all things including the elements, ought by rights to become impossibly arch. In fact, however, grounded in pragmatic common sense ('When the fire is angry, the forest burns for days ... Fire, wind and water are all angry men') and illumined by an all-embracing concern (for the hungry animals who may pick over a camp-site in quest of food as well as for the hypothetical travellers who might like to find an offering of salt, rice and matches), his sense of oneness with nature not only rings with the truth of absolute conviction, but builds credibly to the sense of almost mystic communion in the weirdly haunting episode of the tiger, first warned away by Dersu, then shot by him needlessly though in self-defence, so that it becomes by right of natural law his unchallenged and unchallengeable nemesis.

Visually, *Dersu Uzala* is perhaps less successful than *Jeremiah Johnson* in evoking the awesome majesty of nature as yet unspoiled by civilisation: as Kurosawa has pointed out, the difficulties of location shooting with heavy equipment and lights in the forests of the Ussuri taiga severely restricted his

scope, preventing him from illustrating the true meaning of the word ('Taiga means infinity. However far you travel, it just doesn't end. Its boundless expanse was hard to convey on the screen'). Paradoxically, however, the resulting constriction tends to work on behalf of the film, with the characters either probing fearfully forward through dense jungle or huddled together in little clearings: enclaves in the vastness where the Russians (like the old Chinaman endlessly brooding in front of his makeshift shack) can only dream wistfully of their homelands, whereas Dersu, his life, his wife and his children all buried here, is entirely at ease in his natural environment.

**Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1978**

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#### **DERSU UZALA**

*Director:* Akira Kurosawa  
*Production Company:* Mosfilm  
*Producers:* Yoichi Matsue, Nikolai Sizov  
*Production Manager:* Karlen Agadzhanov  
*Assistant Directors:* Teruyo Nogami, A. Brodsky, E. Galkovskya, O. Evilanova, V. Maksakov, N. Minosima  
*Assistant to the Director:* Takashi Koizumi  
*Screenplay:* Akira Kurosawa, Yuri Nagibin  
*Based on the novels by:* Vladimir Klavdievic Arsenyev  
*Director of Photography:* Asakazu Nakai  
*Photography:* Yuri Gantman, Fyodor Dobronravov  
*Process Shots:* T. Aizenberg  
*Process Shots Artist:* Yuri Chemarev  
*Editors:* Lyudmila Feiginova, V. Stepanovoi  
*Art Director:* Yuri Raksha  
*Costumes:* T. Lichmanovoi  
*Make-up:* V. Bolotnikova  
*Music:* Isaak Shvartz  
*Music Director:* V. Zhordaniya  
*Sound Recording:* O. Burkova  
*Trainers:* V. Zapashnie, M. Zapashnie, L. Danilevich, Z. Olenin  
*Consultant:* I. Gurvich  
*Interpreter:* Lev Korshikov

#### **Cast**

Maksim Munzuk (*Dersu Uzala*)  
Yuri Solomin (*Vladimir Arsenyev*)  
M. Bichkov, V. Khrulev, V. Lastochkin, S. Marin, I. Sikhra, V. Sergiyavov, Ya. Yakobsons, V. Khlestov, G. Polunik, V. Koldin, M. Tetov, S. Sinyavsky, V. Sverba, V. Ignatov (*Arsenyev's detachments*)  
A. Pyatkov (*Olentiev*)  
Vladimir Kremena (*Turtygin*)  
Suimenkul Chokmorov (*Chang-Bao*)  
Svetlana Danilchenko (*Anna*)  
Dima Korshikov (*Vova*)  
D. Netrebin  
S. Zaitsev  
N. Volkov  
V. Kuryanov  
Tsun Du-go  
Z. Mademilova  
A. Erdniev  
V. Prikhodko

USSR/Japan 1975  
142 mins

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#### **KUROSAWA**

##### **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)

##### **Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-jô)**

Fri 17 Feb 20:40; Tue 21 Feb 18:10

##### **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

##### **Red Beard (Akahige)**

Sun 26 Feb 17:25

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