



KUROSAWA

Yojimbo

Introduced by Asif Kapadia, season co-curator (Thursday 23 February only)

Kurosawa on 'Yojimbo'

For a long time I had wanted to make a really interesting film – and it finally turned into this picture. The story is so ideally interesting that it's surprising no one else ever thought of it. The idea is about rivalry on both sides, and both sides are equally bad. We all know what this is like. Here we are, weakly caught in the middle, and it is impossible to choose between the evils. [I doubt that Kurosawa intended any political implication. He is not interested in politics. The moral aspects of the problem – of any problem – appeal to him most.] Myself, I've always wanted somehow or other to stop such senseless battles of bad against bad, but we are all more or less weak: I've never been able to. And that is why the hero of this film is different from us. He is capable of standing squarely in the middle and stopping the fight. At any rate, this was the beginning of the film in my mind.

It was truly an enormous popular hit. Everyone at the company said it was because of the sword-fighting. But that is not so, the reason was the character of the hero and what he does. He is a real hero, he has a real reason for fighting. He doesn't just stand by and wave his sword around.

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

John Sayles on 'Yojimbo'

What haunts you about Yojimbo?

It's just my favourite movie. It's about a lone samurai, Sanjuro [Toshiro Mifune], who hires himself out to the two warring factions in a small town, resulting in the eradication of both. [Its plot became the model for Sergio Leone's 1964 *A Fistful of Dollars*, with Clint Eastwood in the Mifune role.] I knew a little about Japanese culture when I first saw *Yojimbo*, but what I got out of it was the impression of a very caste-oriented society which has broken down. An American-style individual – a guy named Sanjuro – enters, and it turns into a Western fairly easily. It's somewhat based on Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*: all of a sudden there's this guy who keeps a personal code, even if he's not in a traditional society anymore. The US has never been a traditional society, but there are these characters who are admired – whether they are Sam Spade or The Man with No Name or whatever – who have some kind of personal code, but not necessarily a moral one. If your partner gets killed, you're supposed to do something about it: this is the line of action of a Sam Spade, or a Clint Eastwood character. You don't step on a man's hat, or whatever it is. It's personal, individualistic, very existential – something which is very strong in American movies. Existentialism confronting consumerism, profit and greed, a direction that society goes into once tradition and Royalty is gone.

In Japan, there was this incredible breaking up of society after the shogun era was over. Merchants were a new class, who could become very powerful. The same thing happened in Britain at the time of Magna Carta, and later during the slave and sugar trade. Suddenly, there's this incredible *nouveau riche* appetite for things. So what does somebody who is basically the guard for the monarchy do when the monarchy or old ways are gone? Do you just become a bodyguard? A hitman, a hired gun for the cattle barons?

Or do you stand outside that somehow, and say, 'I'm not going to pick on the weak for the strong. That's against my personal code. Yeah, I would kill weak people for the Royalty, but the Royalty is gone.' The reason to kill that seemed to have any sense is gone.

But those thematic points are made quite viscerally, aren't they?

Yojimbo works as a movie, from the first scene. The energy of the music grabbed me the first time I saw it. It's one of the best soundtracks I've ever heard, this great mixture of Western-style music with Japanese-style music, using traditional instruments, such as woodblocks. But elements of that soundtrack are also used as part of the story, for example with the guy who uses woodblocks to call people from the village.

Masaru Sato, who did the score, composes in an analogous fashion to both Max Steiner and Alfred Newman. Sometimes he underlines everything with the woodblocks, or he'll have a piccolo for one character, a woodblock for somebody else, and something very deep for another character, and then sometimes he just lets it play through. It's very well and subtly used, so that you don't remember a big orchestra, Steiner-style, blowing you away – it's all in the service of the picture.

And there are subtle effects on the soundtrack as well, such as the dogs barking...

One thing I always try to do in my own films is remember that when you enter a movie, you're entering a world that's like a culture with its own rules. I think if you do a movie well, and people believe it, it's less a question of whether it's realistic or non-realistic or whatever, than that you've set those rules up well and then stayed true to them.

The opening scene of *Yojimbo* sets up its rules in just this way. You see this guy walking along, a samurai. He scratches himself. Two things are explained without a word: this guy's a samurai and he's down on his luck – he's itchy, he's got fleas. And then he gets to the crossroads and throws his stick up into the air; he's an existential guy, so it doesn't matter where he goes. And pretty much the next thing you see is a dog with a human hand in its mouth, and you basically think, 'This is a tough town, if this is how the chamber of commerce greets you.' Then the samurai walks into town and sees these cartoon characters, these bad guys, on both sides. Quickly, with the music and those pictures and not even any dialogue yet, you are told the story. The world you're entering is laid out, the world you're going to be in for two hours.

One of the reasons I really like *Yojimbo* is that although there are elements which we care about and can get emotionally involved in, there is also a cartoon element to it, an extremeness about it. Everything's a little bit heightened. There's this giant and a guy who looks like a pig and all that, whereas with Toshiro Mifune, even though he has a layer of comedy in his character, you buy this character. He could be in a very realistic movie.

You're known as a director who has a particular skill in working with actors, especially first-time actors. Given that, what do you notice about how Kurosawa handles his cast?

Mifune was a really good actor, and a very good *physical* actor. One of the things I often look for in an actor is how do they move. The two best American physical actors I've ever seen are Steve McQueen, and David Strathairn, who I've worked with a bunch of times. Both he and McQueen are people you just like to watch on screen. McQueen could erase 20 of his lines and improve the character, because there was something that he did with his body that seemed to compensate.

Mifune was the same kind of actor – very physical, and capable of playing lots of different characters, from very violent guys to guys who are a little bit

repressed. And then as this great counterpoint there's the villain Unosuke, played by Tatsuya Nakadai, who I've seen in so many other movies, but who was a theatre actor. Here he's in his Tony Curtis phase, very pretty, and thus in opposition to this hairy, scratchy, itchy anti-hero good guy that Mifune plays. Nakadai is given this beautiful movie-idol introduction, but when he pulls out the gun you realise there's a sleazy side to this very pretty guy, and that makes you realise that this is something which will change the whole equation.

Yojimbo is not purely a comedy, though it isn't tragic either, as *Seven Samurai* is – and it demonstrates an understanding of how to mix a broad range of acting styles. It's one of the few movies I've seen where that mix works.

John Sayles interviewed by Leslie Felperin, *Sight and Sound*, September 1996

YOJIMBO

Director: Akira Kurosawa

©: Toho Co. Ltd.

Production Companies: Kurosawa Productions, Toho Co. Ltd.

Producers: Tomoyuki Tanaka, Ryuzo Kikushima

Production Supervisor: Hiroshi Nezu

Assistant Production Supervisor: Shigeru Nakamura

Chief Assistant Director: Shiro Moritani

Assistant Directors: Masanobu Deme, Yasuhiro Yoshimatsu, Yoshikumi Wada

Script Supervisor: Teruyo Nogami

Screenplay: Ryuzo Kikushima, Akira Kurosawa

Screenplay: Hideo Oguni *

Director of Photography: Kazuo Miyagawa

Lighting: Choshiro Ishii

Assistant Lighting: Shoji Kaneko

Assistant Cinematographer: Takao Saito

Stills Photography: Masao Fukuda

Assistant Editor: Reiko Kaneko

Art Director: Yoshiro Muraki

Assistant Art Director: Yoshifumi Honda

Properties: Koichi Hamamura

Costumes: Yoshiro Muraki, Masahiro Kato

Hair: Yoshiko Matsumoto, Junjiro Yamada

Music: Masaru Sato

Choreography: Hiroshi Kanesu

Sound: Choshichiro Mikami, Hisashi Shimonaga

Assistant Sound: Zen Shida

Sound Mixer: Masanobu Miyazaki

Sound Effects: Ichiro Minawa

Transportation: Ginzo Osumi

Swordplay Instructor: Yushio Sugino

Swordplay Technique: Ryu Kuze

Cast

Toshiro Mifune (*Sanjuro Kuwabatake*)

Eijirō Tono (*Gonji, the saké seller*)

Seizaburō Kawazu (*Seibei, Tazaemon's henchman*)

Isuzu Yamada (*Orin, Seibei's wife*)

Hiroshi Tachikawa (*Yoichiro, Seibei's son*)

Susumu Fujita (*Honma, the ex-yojimbo*)

Kyu Sazanka (*Ushitora, Tokuemom's henchman*)

Daisuke Katō (*Inokichi, Ushitora's brother*)

Tatsuya Nakadai (*Unosuke, Ushitora's younger brother*)

Kamatari Fujiwara (*Tazaemon, the silk merchant*)

Takashi Shimura (*Tokuemon, the saké merchant*)

Atsushi Watanabe (*coffin maker*)

Ikio Sawamura (*Hansuke*)

Akira Nishimura (*Kuma*)

Yoshio Tsuchiya (*Kohei, a farmer*)

Yōko Tsukasa (*Nui, farmer's wife*)

Yōsuke Natsuki (*farmer's son*)

Jerry Fujio (*Roku*)

Takeshi Kato (*Ronin Kobuhachi*)

Ichiro Nakaya (*first samurai*)

Sachio Sakai (*first foot soldier*)

Akira Tani (*Kame*)

Namigoro Rashomon (*Kannuki*)

Gen Shimizu (*Magotaro*)

Yutaka Sada (*Matsukichi*)

Shin Otomo (*Kumosuke*)

Shoichi Hirose (*Ushitora follower*)

Hideyo Amamoto (*Yahachi*)

Shōji 'ki (*Sukeju*)

Fuminori Ohashi (*second samurai*)

Hiroshi Yoseyama (*farmer*)

Senkichi Omura (*traveller*)

Fumiko Homma (*ex-wife of farmer*)

Ryusuke Nishio, Naoya Kusama, Nadao Kirino, Jun Otomo (*Seibei followers*)

Shinpei Takagi, Sho Kusama, Yasuzo Ogawa,

Hiroshi Takagi (*Ushitora followers*)

Junichiro Kukai, Fumiyoshi Kamagaya (*Seibei followers*)

Ichiro Chiba (*second foot soldier*)

Haruya Sakamoto (*Ushitora follower*)

Rinsaku Ogata (*Seibei follower*)

Fumio Kogushi (*Ushitora follower*)

Yoko Terui, Hiromi Mineoka, Michiko Kawa (*women at Seibei's house*)

Japan 1961©

110 mins

* Uncredited

KUROSAWA

Yojimbo (Yōjinbō)

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

Mādadayo

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

Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-jō)

Tue 21 Feb 18:10

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

Dersu Uzala

Mon 27 Feb 20:10 (+ intro by Doug Weir, BFI Technical Delivery Manager)

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