



Big Screen Classics

Gate of Hell Jigokumon

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Director: Teinosuke Kinugasa

Production Company: Daiei

Producer: Masaichi Nagata

Screenplay: Teinosuke Kinugasa

Original story: Kan Kikuchi

Photography: Kohei Sugiyama

Art Director: Kisaku Itoh

Music Director: Yasushi Akutagawa

Cast:

Kazuo Hasegawa (*Morito*)

Machiko Kyo (*Kesa*)

Isao Yamagata (*Wataru*)

Yataro Kurokawa (*Shigemori*)

Kotaro Bando (*Rokuro*)

Jun Tazaki (*Kogenta*)

Koreya Senda (*Kiyomori*)

Japan 1953

91 mins

Digital

NB: The Academy Award for Best Costume Design [in a colour film] was awarded to the uncredited Sanzo Wada for the film. Some sources cite Shima Yoshizane as having responsibility for costume design.

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A leading entry in the vanguard of Japanese cinema at the time of its belated discovery in the west in the early 1950s, *Gate of Hell* was the first Japanese film to nab the top prize at Cannes and the country's second Best Foreign Film Oscar-winner (after *Rashomon*), much to the surprise of its veteran director Teinosuke Kinugasa, who'd never rated it particularly highly. Certainly it comes off a poor second when set against its exact contemporary *Ugetsu monogatari* – Kenji Mizoguchi packs more raw emotional power into individual scenes than Kinugasa conjures throughout the whole of his film.

However, *Gate of Hell* does have numerous historical virtues, starting with the visual treatment. It wasn't Japan's first colour feature but it was the first one to be distributed internationally, and it's clear from the self-conscious set and Oscar-winning costume designs that it was primarily intended to catch the eye. In his 1955 essay 'Imagination and Colour', Carl Theodor Dreyer used Kinugasa's film as an exemplar of colour filmmaking that 'should encourage western directors to use colours more purposefully and also with greater boldness and imagination.' Vivid reds, greens, purples and turquoises abound, especially in the large-scale invasion set piece that opens the film and some of the pageantry thereafter.

One could concoct an exceptionally misleading trailer from the above elements, because the bulk of the film is actually an intimate chamber piece concerning an irresolvable love triangle in which junior samurai Morito (Kazuo Hasegawa) falls helplessly in love with Kesa (*Ugetsu's* Machiko Kyo) and tries to secure a formal betrothal, despite the fact that she's already married to one of his seniors – thus causing Morito to pass through his own psychological gate of hell to rank alongside the actual *jigokumon* on which the heads of defeated enemies are displayed.

Michael Brooke, *Sight and Sound*, January 2013

A contemporary review

Like earlier Japanese period films to be seen in this country, *Gate of Hell* is, in the first place, remarkable for its extraordinary surface detail – costumes, settings, ritual, performances all hold one's continually fascinated interest and admiration. *Gate of Hell* has the additional advantage of being shot in colour (Eastmancolor), and this is employed to better effect than perhaps ever before in a film. The images, alternatively rich in heavy contrasts and then blending in harmonious unity, are of exceptional beauty: isolated shots – the gate of the monastery, a temple rising from a lake, a group of horsemen galloping along the shore – seem to linger in the mind long after the film has run its course. The playing, particularly of the two leading players, Kazuo Hasegawa and Machiko Kyo, heavily impassive in parts, vividly, even violently expressive in others, reaches the standard one has come to expect from Japanese actors playing in the Kabuki style. *Gate of Hell* does not perhaps organise its narrative with the same inevitability as *Rashomon*, nor is it as perfectly shaped as *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail*. Yet its dramatic qualities are as subtle and gripping as those of either. And the images are miraculous.

Monthly Film Bulletin, July 1954

Big Screen Classics

The Grand Budapest Hotel

Thu 1 Jan 12:20; Sat 10 Jan 20:55; Wed 28 Jan 17:50 (+ intro by Alice Sage, Research Fellow on the Film Costumes in Action project)

All About Eve

Thu 1 Jan 14:45; Sat 17 Jan 20:20;
Tue 27 Jan 20:20

Ran

Thu 1 Jan 17:40; Sat 17 Jan 14:20;
Sun 25 Jan 12:10; Fri 30 Jan 14:20

The Umbrellas of Cherbourg

Les parapluies de Cherbourg
Fri 2 Jan 18:00; Thu 15 Jan 20:45;
Thu 22 Jan 20:45

The Leopard Il gattopardo

Sat 3 Jan 14:50; Sun 18 Jan 17:20;
Tue 20 Jan 14:00

Gate of Hell Jigokumon

Sun 4 Jan 15:20; Thu 8 Jan 20:50; Tue 13 Jan 21:00

In the Mood for Love Fa yeung nin wah

Mon 5 Jan 18:00; Fri 16 Jan 20:50;
Mon 19 Jan 20:45; Mon 26 Jan 14:30

The Piano

Tue 6 Jan 20:30; Sat 24 Jan 20:35

My Beautiful Laundrette

Wed 7 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Melanie Bell, Feminist Film Historian and Principal Investigator for the Film Costumes in Action project); Mon 12 Jan 20:55;
Thu 29 Jan 14:40

Moon

Fri 9 Jan 20:50; Wed 21 Jan 18:15 (+ intro by Melanie Bell, Feminist Film Historian and Principal Investigator for the Film Costumes in Action project)

Black Panther

Sun 11 Jan 18:15; Sat 31 Jan 20:20

Velvet Goldmine

Wed 14 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Professor Sarah Street, University of Bristol, and Co-investigator of the Film Costumes in Action project);
Fri 23 Jan 20:35

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The Japanese critic Tadao Sato has characterised [Teinosuke] Kinugasa as a master in the mould of a Henry King or a George Cukor: limited by choice of subject, but an expert at crafting fully satisfying individual films. Sato contends that Kinugasa saw himself as three people: a liberal, an artist and, simultaneously, an entertainer; able to do it all, make money and direct 'serious' films. Donald Richie concurs, and observes Kinugasa as a standard bearer for the Japanese industry, maintaining a high reputation without attracting more than minimal controversy. Kinugasa often went off on his own to make personal films which left him broke, only to return to the majors and continue grinding out popular features.

Although Kinugasa did gain attention with his experimental films of 1926 and 1928, his first real accolades came during the same era from his work in the period film – the *jidai-geki*. He was known as an expert storyteller, and in his films of the 1920s and 1930s he created what became the archetypal Japanese romantic hero. These films of mythic heroism showed Kinugasa's ability to build mood and atmosphere, and he was regarded, along with Daisuke Ito and Sadao Yamanaka, as one of the finest makers of the action epic.

The not altogether flattering appraisals by Sato and Richie do little to diminish a desire to know more about Kinugasa's career, since his prominence is undeniable. It is rather obvious, however, that Kinugasa was fully creative in only a very few of his feature films. Richie has aptly called his style eclectic, and it is partly because of the variable stylistic nature of his separate films that there are reservations concerning his overall artistry; not incidentally, the same criticism is voiced in regard to his own social philosophy. Kinugasa's early experiments were in conjunction with the Japanese avant-garde, and paralleled the beginning of an attachment to proletarian causes which ostensibly continued throughout his career. This progressive tendency appears initially rather suspect, however, since Kinugasa not only made more than a hundred simple entertainment features, but also the general interpretation of his films is decidedly traditional.

We can go at least part of the way towards reconciling this problem by saying that his use of mood and atmosphere, the most pervasive attributes of his style, were his praxis for the ultimate power and burden of human emotion. At its most basic, Kinugasa varied his film structure to express a motivation of character which was made consistent by the changing nature of emotion itself. Thus the environment of *A Page of Madness* determines the quality of the hero's actions to the same degree that chivalry and ancient morality dictate the course of action for the climax of *Gate of Hell*. Kinugasa created a system of emotional involvement based on an individual's capacity to respond to his immediate surroundings; larger themes, either social or anti-social, progressive or traditional, were relevant only to the degree to which they gave substance to his ideas of man's emotional involvement with himself and others.

Robert Cohen, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1976