



## KILLER KUROSAWA-LATER YEARS

This second in a series of outstanding films directed by Akira Kurosawa concludes my tribute to Japan's most famous and revered director.

**The Bad Sleep Well (1960):** Promising executive Koichi Nishi (played by the charismatic Toshiro Mifune, Kurosawa's recurring leading man well into the sixties), marries into a corrupt corporate dynasty, wedding the company boss's pretty daughter Yoshiko (Kyoko Kagawa), who also has a slight physical disability. But is Nishi marrying for love? Yes and no. While increasingly devoted to his delicate, innocent bride, he also bears a secret, well-earned grudge against his ruthless father-in-law, Iwabuchi (Masayuki Mori), for a past act of cruelty serious enough to justify vengeance. This modern-day variation on "Hamlet" is a tense, complex psychological drama, with star Mifune (barely recognizable in glasses) turning in an unusually restrained performance. While succeeding more as revenge tale than romance, the film hooks you regardless. There's very little chance "Bad" will put you to sleep.

**Yojimbo (1961):** Stepping smack into a bloody village feud, wandering samurai Sanjuro (Mifune) hires himself out as bodyguard for silk merchant Tazaemon (Kamatari Fujiwara), then makes a conflicting agreement with sake merchant Tokuemon (Takashi Shimura). Playing both sides against each other, Sanjuro sits back to watch the mortal enemies destroy each other, as meek townsfolk cower behind shuttered doors. A bleakly funny samurai epic, "Yojimbo" is built around the commanding physical presence of Mifune, the archetype for Clint Eastwood's "Man With No Name". This violent, highly stylized morality tale is also a devastating satire of gang warfare, with Sanjuro as its smirking, neutral overlord. Don't miss this turbulent masterpiece, later adapted by Sergio Leone as "**A Fistful of Dollars**".

**Sanjuro (1962):** In Kurosawa's sequel to "Yojimbo", solitary, eccentric warrior Sanjuro (Mifune) takes nine green young samurai under his wing as they become emmeshed in a potentially deadly conspiracy. It turns out the uncle of the young group's leader is the area's reigning Chamberlain, who's just been renounced and arrested by his own corrupt superintendent. Sanjuro's savvy counsel to the virtuous but impulsive youths ("things are not always what they seem") gets repeated and borne out through various developments

which eventually help restore justice to the land. "Sanjuro" may not match its predecessor in sheer virtuosity, but it's actually more fun, thanks to Mifune's comic scenery-chewing, and the innately humorous contrast between the clean, proper youths and their unlikely, unkempt protector. Bottom-line: in this entry, Mifune himself really warms to "Sanjuro", and as a result, so do we.

**High and Low (1963):** Next the master adapts an Ed McBain novel, an American writer of police procedurals he admired almost as much as Western director John Ford. In one of his last signature roles, a maturing Mifune is electrifying as self-made businessman Kingo Gondo. Just as Gondo's leveraged himself to the hilt to gain controlling interest in a large and prosperous shoe company, a kidnapper mistakenly nabs Gondo's chauffeur's son, thinking it's Gondo's own boy. At first refusing to pay the ransom, Gondo soon realizes he has no choice, and risks everything he's built to save the child's life. Both a gripping detective story and meditation on the nature of honor and Japanese class differences, "High and Low" ultimately earns high marks, thanks mainly to a snappy second half focusing on the investigative work handled by Chief Detective Tokura (Tatsuya Nakadai), and his idiosyncratic but dogged team of cops.

**Dersu Uzala (1975):** After a roughly ten year decline in popularity and output (during which time Kurosawa actually attempted suicide), the master rose again in this stunning Russian language film, actually co-produced by the Soviets. Captain Vladimir Arseniev (Yuri Solomin), a Russian army explorer doing a topological survey in remotest Siberia, meets the title character (poignantly played by the grizzled Muksim Munzak), a man of the wilderness whose life is defined by his keen instinct for nature and surviving off the land. Helping Arseniev navigate this rough territory, over time the Captain forges a deep bond with Dersu. But as the gifted hunter's talents recede with old age, Arseniev must bring his friend back to civilization. Can Dersu adapt to this alien environment? The story of unlikely friendship and the passing of a way of life, the film's subtle beauty and power earned it the Best Foreign Film Oscar.

**Kagemusha (1980):** Even with Dersu's critical success, the aging director would have to wait five years, do whiskey ads, and enlist the aid of fans Francis Coppola and George Lucas to make the miraculous "Kagemusha". After the death of Shingen, a powerful warlord in mid-16th-century Japan, brother Nobukado (Tsutomu Yamazaki) recruits a low-born thief (Tatsuya Nakadai) to impersonate the warrior king, teaching him to walk, talk, ride, and command like the man whose

likeness he uncannily bears. But maintaining the ruse proves difficult, especially as Shingen's enemies suspect their rival of using a double. Staggering in its scope, "Kagemusha" features breathtaking visual sequences and, at its heart, a mortal tragedy worthy of Shakespeare. Kurosawa not only tells a whopping good yarn rooted in historic reality, he uses the vulgar but sympathetic figure of Nakadai's thief to explore questions of identity and the theatrical nature of power. In addition, Kurosawa's painterly use of color (especially during the large-scale battle set pieces, for which he used five cinematographers) and his haunting dream sequences are simply unparalleled. "Kagemusha" is a feast for the eyes and the spirit.

**Ran (1985):** This epic, rousing adaptation of "King Lear" gets transplanted to sixteenth century Japan, where powerful warlord Hidetora (Nakadai) decides to divide his estates among his two seemingly compliant older sons, banishing third son Saburo (Daisuke Ryu) after he challenges his proud father's will. With his family soon splintered and set against each other, Hidetora realizes too late his error in judgment, and the injustice he visited on the forthright Saburo. Kurosawa's widely acknowledged late-career peak remains a riveting and vibrant epic, its drama magnified by an awesome visual sweep encompassing both period pageantry and setting. (The film's gorgeous palette is particularly striking in that the director was almost totally blind by this point, so that his detailed painted storyboards for each scene were absolutely crucial.) Amidst all this color, Shakespeare's fundamental themes of loyalty and betrayal also play out with full force, thanks to superb performances by both Nakadai and Ryu in the pivotal roles. A must-see film.

**Madadayo (1993):** Kurosawa's atypical swan song, unabashedly sentimental and set on a small, intimate stage, reflects the director himself at twilight, confronting his own impending mortality. (Kurosawa would actually pass away five years later, at 88). Here, veteran actor Tatsuo Matsumura plays Hyakken Uchida, known simply as "The Professor", a warm, beloved writer and teacher who retires as the Second War rages in 1943, and is cared for by his loyal wife (Kyoko Kagawa) and a core of grown-up former students who check in regularly. Soon they institute an annual tribute to the old fellow, bringing together all the not-so-young men Uchida once mentored, where in unison the assembled group calls out to their spry former teacher, "Are you ready?", and with considerable spirit he replies, "Madadayo!" (Not yet!). Mirroring the astonishing journey and legacy of its prodigious director, this deceptively simple film is a moving affirmation of a life richly lived.