Directed by Akira Kurosawa
Written by Masato Ide, Hideo Oguni, Ryûzô Kikushima, Akira Kurosawa, and Shûgorô Yamamoto (novel "Akahige shinryô tan")
Produced by Ryûzô Kikushima and Tomoyuki Tanaka
Music by Masaru Satô
Cinematography by Asakazu Nakai and Takao Saitô

Toshirô Mifune ... Dr. Kyôjô Niide
Yûzô Kayama ... Dr. Noboru Yasumoto
Tsutomu Yamazaki ... Sahachi
Reiko Dan ... Osugi
Miyuki Kuwano ... Onaka
Kyôko Kagawa ... Madwoman
Tatsuyoshi Ehara ... Genzô Tsugawa
Terumi Niki ... Otoyo
Akemi Negishi ... Okuni, the mistress


Akira Kurosawa, Japanese director and screenwriter, was born in the Omori district of Tokyo. His father, Yutaka Kurosawa, a native of Akita Prefecture and of samurai descent, was an army officer who became a teacher and administrator of physical education. A graduate of the Toyama Imperial Military Academy, he earned a moderate income at the Ebara Middle School, famous for its spartan program. The director’s mother, whom he has described as a self-sacrificing realist—‘a typical woman of the Meiji era’—came from an Osaka merchant family. Akira was the last of the couple’s children, following four sisters and three brothers. The oldest sister had already left home and married by the time Kurosawa was born, and the oldest brother left while he was still a child. The second brother had died before Kurosawa was born, so that Akira grew up with three sisters and the one elder brother who was later to be a great influence in his life. The youngest of the sisters, to whom Kurosawa was closest, died at the age of sixteen while he was in the fourth grade.

Kurosawa characterizes himself in childhood as at first backward at school and physically weak, to the disappointment of his father. In spite of that weakness, he soon came to share his father’s enthusiasm for physical challenge, developing a lifelong interest in sports, especially baseball, and an attitude of “single-minded devotion to a discipline.” As a child of ten he practiced kendo, traditional Japanese swordsmanship, and “assumed all the affectations of a boy fencer.” His father’s influence extended in another significant direction. In a time when films were considered frivolous entertainment, Yutaka Kurosawa insisted on their educational value, and took his whole family regularly to the movies as well as to traditional storytellers in the music-halls around Kagurazaka. ...

The great Kanto earthquake of 1923 occurred during Kurosawa’s second year at the Keika Middle School. His brother
took him on “an expedition to conquer fear,” forcing him to look at scenes of horrifying destruction. ...He expressed the wish to become a painter. Despite the family’s declining fortunes, his father did not object, but insisted that he go to art school...

Kurosawa found it hard to give his mind to his artistic career during the Depression. His family could not afford to buy the materials he needed, and the distractions of those disturbed times were many. He explored literature, especially the works of Dostoevsky and Gorki; he went to the theatre; he listened to classical music; he became fascinated by movies. In this last he was guided by his brother, who wrote program notes for movie theatres and took part in shows himself as a benshi, a professional commentator, specializing in foreign films. Kurosawa was later to list nearly a hundred films that particularly impressed him in the years up to 1929. The list is mainly composed of films from Russia and the West, and includes most of the great names from Caligari to Chaplin. In 1929 Kurosawa joined the Proletarian Artists’ League, not so much from a commitment to Marxism as out of a fashionable interest in all new movements...He left home at this time, ostensibly to live with his brother, but actually moving between various rented rooms and the homes of Communist friends.

Increasingly disillusioned with the political movement and with his painting, Kurosawa left the League in the spring of 1932 and went to share the bohemian life of his brother, who lived, to the disapproval of the family, with a woman in the tenement district of Kagurazaka. The movie-going continued, of course, but now came the first of the talkies that would mean the end of Heigo’s career. The benshi was no longer required for sound films, and the strike organized to persuade the studios to resist the change was doomed to fail. Heigo found himself a leader of the strike, and it was this painful role above all that led, in Kurosawa’s view, to his brother’s suicide attempt. Kurosawa tried to reconcile Heigo to the family by arranging his marriage to the woman he lived with, but in 1933, at the age of twenty-seven, Heigo’s second suicide attempt succeeded. The effect on Kurosawa was profound, and he came to describe the brother, whom he saw as a more pessimistic version of himself, “as a negative strip of film that led to my own development as a positive image.”

Kurosawa had by this time lost faith in his talent as a painter. He felt himself too easily influenced by the vision of whatever artist he was studying. “In other words, I did not—and still don’t—have a completely, personal, distinctive way of looking at things...Kurosawa answered a newspaper advertisement put out by the newly established PCL (Photo Chemical Laboratory, later to become Toho Motion Picture Company)...Out of more than five hundred applicants, over one hundred and thirty were selected on the basis of the essay, but only seven passed the next test, which involved writing a scenario from a newspaper story. Kurosawa was one of the five who came through the final interview, having already established a rapport with Kajiro Yamamoto, whom he impressed with his knowledge of the visual arts. Kurosawa joined PCL in 1936, when the company was only two years old, a vigorous, open-minded organization that encouraged experiment and trained its assistant directors by giving them every job in the production process. After an uneasy start, Kurosawa joined the group led by director Yamamoto, in whom he discovered “the best teacher of my entire life.”

...Kurosawa now began to win prizes from the Ministry of Education for his filmscripts...Kurosawa resigned himself for a time to turning out formulaic scripts and drinking up the proceeds, usually in the company of his old friend Uekusa, who had come to Tokyo as an extra and stayed on to write scripts himself. The drinking led to a preulcerative stomach condition, which Kurosawa attempted to treat by making strenuous trips into the mountains. One day he saw an advertisement for a new novel, Sugata Sanshiro, by Tsuneo Tomita. Reading through the summary of the story, he knew instinctively that here was the subject for a film that would not only be acceptable to the censors but ideal for himself to direct... Sugata Sanshiro (the Western order for the name) is a Meiji period story about the origins of judo, tracing the rise of one of its first practitioners. The film was made in accordance with national policy dictated by the Information Bureau. Since the film’s content was thus restricted, Kurosawa took the opportunity to concern himself with its form. At a time when the received idea was that a Japanese film should be as simple as possible, “I disagreed and got away with disagreeing—that much I could say.” Several critics remark how many of the characteristic features of Kurosawa’s style are already apparent here. Richie points to the kind of story (a young man’s education), to the tendency to “cyclic form,” to the interest in how things are done (in this case the method of judo itself), and to “the extraordinary economy of the way in which he shows his story.” Already Kurosawa is making use of his favorite punctuation device, the wipe, between scenes....

Kurosawa’s next film, Ichiban utsukishiku (The Most Beautiful, 1943), belongs to a cycle of “national policy” projects designed to encourage increased industrial production. Unusually for him its subject is women...The style of The Most Beautiful, according to Ritchie, was influenced by German and Russian documentary, but he notes also the beginnings of a number of techniques not especially associated with documentary, that Kurosawa was to develop later as his own, such as the “shortcut” for narrative transitions, and a “peculiarly personal use of the flashback.”...

On February 15, 1945, the month Sanshiro Sugata Part II was released, Kurosawa married the star of The Most Beautiful, Yoko Taguchi (whose real name was Kato Kiyo), at the Meiji shrine in Tokyo, with Yamamoto and his wife as matchmakers. They were at first very poor, his salary being less than a third of what his wife’s had been as an actress. Their son Jisao was born in December of the same year; a daughter, Kuzuko, was born in 1954. As Japan’s defeat in the war approached, Kurosawa wrote a script for a film called Dokko.
Kurosawa’s Rashomon 1950, was a landmark, not only in his own career but also in the history of Japanese cinema and its relation to the cinema of the West....

Kurosawa has acquired the reputation among his collaborators of being, as his production chief Hiroshi Nezu said, “the best editor in the world.” He sees editing as the most important phase of production, giving life to the film, while pointing out that nothing can rescue a bad script. His method is unusual. Instead of shooting scenes in random order of convenience, he prefers to shoot chronologically, following the script, as far as possible, scene by scene. He then edits the rushes when each day’s shooting is over, so that he can maintain the involvement of his crew in the film’s progress, and so that “I have only the fine cut to complete when the shooting is finished.”...

Once Mizoguchi’s new films began to appear, from 1952 on, he and Kurosawa became the opposite poles in critical debates among French New Wave critics, generally to the detriment of Kurosawa. But Rashomon’s influence was wide: Robbe-Grillet declared it had inspired L’Année dernière à Marienbad (1961) and Bergman called his own Virgin Spring (1959) “a pale imitation.” The Japanese were equally confused by Rashomon’s foreign success, suspecting uneasily that the film appealed in the West because it was “exotic,” or alternatively because it was “Western.” At any rate, according to Kurosawa, Toho were still reluctant to send his next film “Western.” At any rate, according to Kurosawa, Toho were still reluctant to send his next film

On January 29, 1959, Kurosawa gave his first press interview and announced the formation of his own company, Kurosawa Productions. Toho was to put up one million yen in an agreement requiring three films over two years, with profits and losses to be shared equally with Kurosawa. It was the first independent company headed by a working director in the history of Japanese cinema....

The story of Tengoku to jigoku (High and Low, 1963) is based on an Ed McBain detective story called King’s Ransom. The son of Gondo, production head of a shoe company (Toshiro Mifune), has apparently been kidnapped and a ransom is demanded. When it turns out that the son of Gondo’s chauffeur

kono yari (The Lifted Spear), but it was abandoned in the pre-production stage because of a shortage of horses. This led to the hastily assembled production of Tora no o fumu otokotachi (They Who Step on the Tiger’s Tail), during which Japan surrendered. Kurosawa clashed angrily over this film with the Japanese censors, who had remained at their post even after the government collapsed. They pronounced it an insult to Japanese traditions. The American censors who succeeded them also banned the film, some say for its feudalism, but according to Kurosawa because the Japanese had failed to submit it for approval....American soldiers were in the habit of visiting the set during production, among them on one occasion John Ford, who left a message which Kurosawa never received. He only learned of the visit when the two met at last in London years later....

Richie calls the theme existentialist, comparing Dostoevsky and quoting with approval Richard Brown: “It consists of a restrained affirmation within the context of a giant negation.” It is clearly possible in interpretation to emphasize one strand more than another in the structure of this very various film. Burch, in considering it “Kurosawa’s first full-blown masterwork and the most perfect statement of his dramatic geometry,” also finds it “somewhat marred by its complicity with the reformist ideology dominant in that period.”...Kurosawa saw himself reaching “a certain maturity” in this film, which he felt was the culmination of the “researches” he had carried out since the war; nevertheless the film left him dissatisfied, and it contains blunders that still embarrassed him when interviewed in 1966 by Cahiers du Cinéma. Asked if he considered himself a realist or a romantic, he replied, “I am a sentimentalist.”

Kurosawa collaborated on the script for Ikiru with two other writers, Shinobu Hashimoto and Hideo Oguni. Since the earliest films he had preferred not to write alone, because of the danger of one-sidedness in interpreting a character, for a character is usually the starting point. The process of writing Kurosawa describes as “a real competition.” The team retires to a hotel or a house isolated from distractions. Then, sitting around one table, each one writes, then takes and rewrites the others; work, “Then we talk about it and decide what to use.” Although he finds scriptwriting the hardest part of his work, he lays great emphasis on its importance. It is the first stage in an essentially collaborative process, of which the next is the careful rehearsal with the cast before any filming takes place. The scripts are often written with particular actors in mind. “We don’t just rehearse the actors, but every part of every scene—the camera movements, the lighting, everything.”...

The ministry of...
has been taken by mistake, Gondo must decide whether he will still pay the ransom—to do so would ruin him and allow his rivals to take over the company. Agreeing to pay, he is instructed to throw a briefcase containing the money from a high-speed train. We then learn the identity of the kidnapper; Takeuchi, a poor medical student, provoked by the sight of Gondo’s ostentatious house on a hill overlooking the Yokohama slums where he himself struggles to live. As the police close in, Takeuchi (also a pusher of heroin) kills his accomplices. He is finally captured, and Gondo visits him in prison. The first part of the film (65 minutes of 143) takes place entirely in Gondo’s hilltop house, the action restricted to phone calls and conversations, filmed in long takes shot with several cameras. Three identical sets were built to represent the scene at different times of day, according to Richie; cameras followed the actors movements closely but were positioned outside the set itself. “The effect is one of complete freedom within a very constricted area,” and the camerawork makes the hour-long sequence seem much shorter. It also provides a context for the explosive action that follows, the four-minute sequence on the speeding train. The rest of the narrative is full of incidents, sights and sounds, punctuated by the famous moment when red smoke, in color on the black-and-white screen, appears from a chimney to reveal the location of the discarded briefcase, after which the action accelerates for the final chase. This bold two-part structure is seen by Burch as another outstanding example of Kurosawa’s distinctive “dramatic geometry.” Richie sees it as marking two areas of thematic interest, the first emotionally involving, the second intellectual. Joan Mellen considers it fortunate that the “rather obvious moral dilemma” of the first part is replaced by the “much more interesting treatment of the personality of the kidnapper.” The second part, after the train sequence, begins by deliberately destroying the pattern of suspense, revealing the kidnapper in his miserable daily existence. For Mellen, this part, with its descent into the slums and its satirical presentation of police and press, “comes close to developing into one of the finest critiques of the inequitable class structure of Japan ever offered in a Japanese film.” She answers Tadao Sat’s objection that a man destined to become a doctor would never have risked his future as Takeuchi does, by reading it as a deliberate irony confirming “the depth of Kurosawa’s social vision.” In the final confrontation, which Richie reads as Dostoievskian, the faces of Gondo and the kidnapper begin to merge with each other’s reflections in the glass screen dividing them, indicating their underlying identity. High and Low placed second on the Kinema Jumpo list and received the Mainichi Concours award for best picture and screenplay. Some French critics, however, saw it as Kurosawa’s worst picture. Informed of this, Kurosawa wondered if they had not liked it because of the Americaness of Gondo’s style of life—something he had to show, since it is a part of real Japanese society.

In the five years before his next production, [after Akahige/Red Beard], Kurosawa was involved in a number of unhappy projects. Japanese companies refused him support, so he sought financing in the United States. When bad weather postponed shooting in Rochester, New York, of a script called The Runaway Train, Fox invited Kurosawa to direct the Japanese sequences of Tora! Tora! Tora! After a few weeks shooting, bitter disagreements with the studio ended with Fox claiming that Kurosawa had resigned because of bad health (meaning mental health), and Kurosawa insisting that he had been misled (for instance, about the other director supposed to work with him—he had been promised David Lean) and then dismissed against his will.

Disillusioned, Kurosawa returned to Japan, where an independent company was formed, called Yonki no Kai (The Four Musketeers), consisting of Kurosawa, Kinshita, Kon Ichikawa, and Masaki Kobayashi. It was an attempt to reassert the power and independence of the director in what Kurosawa has referred to as the Dark Ages of Japanese cinema. Kurosawa’s first venture for the company was Dodes’kaden (1970), his first picture in color. Kurosawa next made a television documentary, Uma no uta (The song of the Horse). Then, on December 22, 1971, a housemaid found him lying in his half-filled bath, wounded with twenty-two slashes on his neck, arms, and hands. He had attempted suicide. Joan Mellen has discussed this attempt in the context of Japanese attitudes toward death and suicide; Kurosawa himself spoke of neurosis, low spirits, and the realization (after an operation for a severe case of gallstones) that he had been in pain for years. His eyesight too had begun to fail. “Letters and telegrams came from all over the world; there were offers from children to help finance my films. I realized I had committed a terrible error.” His spirits were fully restored by an offer in 1972 from the Soviet Union to direct a subject of his choice. Kurosawa chose to write a script based on the writing of Vladimir Aresniev, which he had read in the 1940s. Arseniev was a Russian soldier who, while mapping the Russian-Manchurian border in the early 1900s, formed a friendship with Dersu Uzala, an old hunter who served as a guide for him and his party.

Dersu Uzala took almost four years to complete, two of which were spent filming in the Siberian winter. It was shot in 70-mm with six-track stereophonic sound. Dersu Uzala was given the American Academy Award for best foreign picture, a Federation of International Film Critics Award, a Gold Medal at the Ninth Moscow Festival, and in Italy in 1977 the Donatello...
Donald Richie: “Red Beard” (Criterion Notes)

After finishing High and Low (1963), director Akira Kurosawa recalls, “I started looking around for something else to do and quite by accident picked up [the novel] Red Beard by Shugoro Yamamoto. At first I thought it would make a good script for [fellow director] Horikawa but as I wrote I grew so interested that I knew I would have to direct it myself.

“The script is quite different from the novel. One of the major characters, the young girl, is not even found in the book. While I was writing I kept remembering Dostoevsky and I tried to show the same thing that he showed in the character of Nelli in The Insulted and the Injured.

“I had something special in mind when I made this film because I wanted to make something that my audience would want to see, something so magnificent that people would just have to see it. To do this we all worked harder than ever, tried to overlook no detail, were willing to undergo any hardship. It was really hard work [and the film took longer before the cameras than any other Japanese film including Seven Samurai—all two years] and I got sick twice. Mifune and Kayama each got sick once . . .”

The story:

At the end of the Tokugawa period a young man, Noboru Yasumoto (Yuzo Kayama) returns to Edo after several years’ study at the Dutch medical schools in Nagasaki. Told to make a formal call at the Koishikawa Public Clinic and pay his respects to its head Kyoyo Niide, commonly called Red Beard (Toshiro Mifune), he learns that he is to stay there and work as an intern. Since he had hoped to be attached to the court medical staff and had certainly never considered working in a public clinic, the news is a great shock. He refuses, purposely breaks the hospital rules, will not wear a uniform, and further trespasses by lounging around a forbidden area, the small pavilion where a beautiful but insane patient (Kyoko Kagawa) is kept.

Like the hero of Sashiro Sugata, like the detective in Stray Dog, and the shoe manufacturer in High and Low, the young doctor learns: Red Beard too is the story of an education. Kayama learns that medical theory (illusion) is different from a man dying (reality); that—as the film later reveals—what he had always thought about himself (upright, honest, hard-working) must now be reconciled with what he finds himself to also be (arrogant, selfish, insincere); and most importantly, that evil itself is the most humanly common thing in this world; that good is uncommon.

At the beginning his position is that of the hero of Kurosawa’s High and Low. He did nothing to merit exile in a public clinic, he has done nothing “wrong.” And yet here he finds himself unable to escape, unable to see in what way he merits this punishment. Put in a way that Kurosawa would not care for, one might say that he is, like all of us, born into an estate concerning which we were not consulted and for which we did not ask.

The production:

To describe the look of Red Beard one should speak of something burnished and glowing, like the body of a fine cello. If a single adjective were used I should think it would be: “mellow.”

This mellowness is contained within the look of the film itself. It has a patina, the way certain of Mizoguchi’s films have a patina. This is the result of strong concern for realistic detail. Kurosawa’s efforts to achieve this are already legend in Japan. The main set was really an entire town with back alleys and side streets (some of which were never filmed) which was so large that shots of just the roofs fill the whole wide screen during the credit titles.

All of the material used for the town was about as old as...
it is supposed to look. The tiled roofs were taken from buildings more than a century old; all of the lumber was from the oldest available farmhouses; costumes and props were all "aged" for months before their appearance; the bedding (made in Tokugawa-period patterns) was really slept in for up to half a year before shooting. Making the main gate, which so figures in the film, occupied almost everyone. The wood was more than a hundred years old and both staff and director kept adding touches to make it look still older. (After the film was shot, the gate was re-erected at the entrance of the theatre premiering the film and drew as great a crowd as the picture itself.)

Kurosawa used this magnificent set (so grand that tourist bus companies ran special tours during the two years of filming in order to show visitors its splendors) in a very telling way. The main street is seen for just one minute and its destruction was incorporated into the earthquake scenes; the scenes with the bridges are likewise short; so are those in the elaborately constructed paddy. The director, if one wants to look at it this way, completely wasted his million yen set.

After Red Beard had opened, while it was still playing to packed houses and was proving to be indeed just the kind of picture that people want to see, something "so magnificent that people would just have to see it," I told Kurosawa that I sensed that he had come to some sort of conclusion, some sort of resting place. He had pushed his style to what appeared to be its ultimate. At the same time he continued and, it would seem, completed the theme which had been his throughout his entire career. It might even be called the summation of his work because in Red Beard he had vindicated his humanism and his compassion. He had shown that only after the negative (evil) has been fully experienced can the positive, the good, joy itself, be seen from behind, abruptly turning to face the young intern after a delay. Here and later Mifune invests Red Beard with gruff inscrutability; the doctor believes in teaching through object lessons and experience, not through lectures.

His first assignment simply involves watching by an old man's side as he dies. Yasumoto finds he is barely equal to the task. It is too real, too painful. There is a method to Red Beard's lesson. Yasumoto thinks of medicine as a career path, not an interaction with the sick. He is warned away from the beautiful patient known as The Mantis (Kyôko Kagawa), who is notorious for killing her husbands and is held in isolation. But she is seductive, and he nearly loses his life in trying to help her. Watch here how Kurosawa uses his compositions of the two characters enclosed in a room to concentrate the danger.

The saintly man draws close to death. He has spend his days making products to sell on behalf of his fellow patients. A mudslide shakes the clinic, and a skeleton is unearthed. The old man knows the skeleton belongs to his wife. No, he didn't kill her. It is more tragic than that. He tells his listeners the story in an evocative flashback which includes an earthquake, and notice how well Kurosawa photographs it through a cloud of dust, with foreground action and a line of people fleeing at the top of the frame.

The second act begins with Red Beard and Yasumoto visiting a brothel to treat for syphilis. There they find the traumatized 12-year-old Otoy (Terumi Niki), who obsessively scrubs the wooden floor. Her mother died outside the brothel, the

Roger Ebert: "Red Beard"
Told in the world of early 19th century Japan, Akira Kurosawa's "Red Beard" is a passionate humanist statement, almost the last he would make about an exemplary human being. After completing its two years of filming in 1965, the master would turn to flawed and damaged characters -- one of them, the hero of "Ran" (1985) inspired by Shakespeare's King Lear. Dr. Kyojô Niide would be the closest he ever came to creating a man moral and good in every respect. In the film you can sense Kurosawa's best nature shining.

In the second act of his career he would allow discouragement and doubt to show through, ending with "Rhapsody in August," (1991) about the devastation of Nagasaki and "Madadayo" (1993) about an old professor beloved by his students. The title is a word meaning "not yet!" The professor recites it at the birthday parties thrown by those he mentored. He was not dead -- not yet. Kurosawa, who perhaps saw some of himself in the professor, died in 1995.

The man called Red Beard is the doctor in charge of a century-old village clinic treating the poor and the penniless. He is played by Toshiro Mifune, in the 16th and last time the two would work together. After such films as "Rashomon," "The Seven Samurai," "Yojimbo," and "High and Low," what a long way they had come, and what a serene note to part on. Dr. Niide is not even seen in the opening scenes of the film, but his presence pervades the clinic, a spartan but spic and span building in a humble neighborhood (Kurosawa built a traditional village to surround it).

The film is not really the story of Red Beard at all, but of Noboru Yasumoto (Yuzo Kayama), an ambitious young man who has graduated from a Dutch medical school in Japan and fancies himself on a fast track to join the shogun's household. He interned at the clinic resentfully, having heard tales of its autocratic director and "smelly" clientele. He suspects family intrigues may have been behind his obscure posting.

The clinic seems to permit a certain amount of democracy among the patients and the loud, energetic nursing and kitchen staffs. They all have opinions on everything. Some patients, like the saintly Sahachi (Tsutomu Yamazaki), are not exactly dying but seem to have moved in permanently, and we find that Red Beard's method is to indirectly treat soul along with body. In some aspects the clinic is a settlement house.

The newcomer Yasumoto declines to cooperate. Surely he is in this backwater unfairly. He refuses even to wear his medical uniform. Kurosawa establishes an omniscient but invisible presence for Red Beard, and then finally introduces him seen from behind, abruptly turning to face the young intern after a delay. Here and later Mifune invests Red Beard with gruff inscrutability; the doctor believes in teaching through object lessons and experience, not through lectures.
crass madam "gave her a home," and she is essentially a sex slave. Red Beard announces that she has a fever and he will take her away to live at the clinic. The madam refuses and summons her guards.

In a scene that stands amusingly outside the film's mood, Red Beard expertly uses martial arts and his knowledge of bones to break the arms and legs of all the guards, leaving them littered about the courtyard. Then he takes Otoyo away. As they leave, he apologizes to Yasumoto for his use of violence. This is a theme through the film: Red Beard's criticism of his own faults. A doctor must never harm others, he informs his pupil, as his victims lie moaning.

The story of Otoyo supplies the emotional heart of "Red Beard." I will not tell too much. Experience it. But observe (after Red Beard orders Yasumoto to keep Otoyo in his room for observation and treatment) that she awakens behind him in darkness and sits upright with a cry. She is in shadow, except for a pinpoint at light that picks out her eyes, glowing fiercely like a tiger's. She turns away, and is a dark silhouette. Then lowers herself and her eyes shine again from the dark. The choreography for camera here must have been meticulous.

Red Beard's philosophy seems to be that the sick grow better by helping others. Two centuries ago, he has a wise and instinctive understanding of psychology: He doesn't lecture patients or help them "talk through" their problems. He places them in practical situations where they are able to take inventory of themselves and focus on the troubles of others. That is the cure. It works for Otoyo and Yasumoto both.

Otoyo, broken in mind and spirit, notices a little thief half her age trying to steal gruel. Still almost catatonic, she rouses herself to offer him some food, and becomes involved in his life. In telling the thief's story, Kurosawa has a magnificent composition where the screen is crossed by clotheslines of drying sheets or kimonos. In foreground, Yasumoto and a nurse listen as, in top background, the thief relates his story. As I describe this, it must be difficult to imagine. How can top and bottom and foreground and background be composed in that way? Kurosawa does it with simple elegance.

For me, the most unforgettable scene in the film takes place after the little boy seems about to die. A dreadful mourning sound comes from outside. What can it be? It is the sound of the cooks, crying the thief's name down into the well, which is believed to penetrate to the center of the earth where souls go. They are calling him back. Otoyo runs out and joins them. What seems to be a single shot looks up at them calling into the well, and pans down its walls to look down at their reflections. How this was accomplished I have no idea.

Another example of the cinematography comes with the passage of the seasons. Rain and snow are both notoriously difficult to photograph. Both are done with great effect. We know Kurosawa awaited a real snowfall. Did he also wait for it to really rain? I've never seen wetter rain in another movie.

"Red Beard" is a long and deliberate film, as it must be, because the lessons of the great doctor cannot be ticked off in vignettes. Doctors need to watch awhile at deathbeds, and learn how to be good. And how a man who has an unearned high opinion of himself can learn goodness through humility. I believe this film should be seen by every medical student. Like Kurosawa's masterpiece, "Ikiru" (1952), it fearlessly regards the meanings of life, and death.

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2014 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

Oct 21 Nicolas Roeg, PERFORMANCE, 1970
Nov 4 Roman Polanski, TESS, 1979
Nov 11 Sydney Pollack, TOOTSIE, 1982
Nov 18 Joel and Ethan Coen, FARGO, 1996
Nov 25 Erik Skjoldbjaerg, INSOMNIA, 1997
Dec 2 Mike Nichols, CHARLIE WILSON’S WAR, 2007

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