

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN

PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND ARTS CENTER

APRIL 24, 2001 (III:14): DERSU UZALA

(Japanese title: Derusu Uzara)

1974 140 minutes, filmed in 70mm

Yuri Solomin Captain Vladimir Arseniev

Maksim Munzuk Dersu Uzala

Suimenkul Chokmorov Jan Bao

Svetlana Danielchanka Mrs. Arseniev

Dima Kortitschew Wowa son of Arseniev

Vladimir Kremena Turtwigin

Aleksandr Pyatkov Olenin

Director Akira Kurosawa

Script Akira Kurosawa and Yuri Nagibin

based on journals by Vladimir Arseniev

Producers Yoichi Matsue and Nikolai Sizov

Cinematographers Fyodor Dobronravov, Yuri Gantman, Asakazu Nakai

Production Companies Atelier 41, Daiei Studios, Mosfilm, Satra

AKIRA KUROSAWA (23 March 1910, Omori, Tokyo, Japan—6 September 1998, Setagaya, Tokyo) wrote or cowrote nearly all of 31 the films he directed and edited several of them as well. Some of them are: *Ame Agarū* (*After the Rain*) 1993, *Yume* (*Dreams*) 1990, *Kagemusha* 1980, *Dodesukaden* 1970, *Yojinbo* 1961 (remade in 1964 as *Per un pugno di dollari* and in 1996 as *Last Man Standing*), *Kakushi toride no san akunin* 1958 (remade in 1977 as *Star Wars*), *Kumonosu jo* (*Throne of Blood*) 1957 (based on *Macbeth*), *Shichinin no samurai* (*Seven Samurai*) 1954 (remade as *The Magnificent Seven*), *Ikiru* 1952, and *Rashomon* 1950 (remade as *The Outrage*). Kurosawa received three Academy Awards: best foreign language picture for *Rashomon* and *Dersu Uzala*, and a Lifetime Achievement Award (1990). He received a nomination for best director for *Ran*.

For much of his career Kurosawa was appreciated far more in the West than in Japan. Zhang Yimou (director of *Red Sorghum* and *Raise the Red Lantern*) wrote that Kurosawa was accused “of making films for foreigners' consumption. In the 1950s, *Rashomon* was criticized as exposing Japan's ignorance and backwardness to the outside world – a charge that now seems absurd. In China, I have faced the same scoldings, and I use Kurosawa as a shield.” He directed his first film in 1943 but says *Drunken Angel* in 1948 was *really* his first film because that was the first one he made without official interference. *Rashomon* (1950), the first Japanese film to find wide distribution in the West, made Kurosawa internationally famous.

Kurosawa was equally comfortable making films about medieval and modern Japan or films based on Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Maxim Gorki, and Evan Hunter. He loved American westerns and was conscious of them when he made his early samurai pictures. When someone told him that Sergio Leone had lifted the plot of *Yojinbo* for *A Fistful of Dollars*, the spaghetti western with Clint Eastwood, Kurosawa told his friend to calm down: he'd lifted the plot himself from Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (Schlock filmmaker Roger Corman stole the plot back for a sword-fighting science fiction nude movie, *The Warrior and the Sorceress* in 1984, and in 1995 Walter Hill copied it again for *Last Man Standing* with Bruce Willis. The story, as they say in the film business, has legs.)

YURI MEFODYEVICH SOLOMIN (18 June 1935, Chita, Russia) is a well-known Russian film actor and director. He played Troiani in *Krasnaya palatka* (*The Red Tent*) 1971. **MAKSIM MUNZUK** (Maksim Monguzhukovich Munzuk, 2 May 1910, Mezhegyei, Tyva, Russia – 28 July 1999, Kyzyl, Tyva, Russia) was a highly-respected Russian stage actor when Kurosawa chose him to play Dersu Uzala, his first screen role. He subsequently acted in six other films, the last of them *Mest* (*Revenge*), 1991. **ASAICHI NAKAI**, the only Japanese cinematographer in the crew, worked with Kurosawa on 11 other films, among them *Akahige* (*Red Beard*)

1965, *Ikuru*, *Kagemusha*, *Throne of Blood*, *Ran*, *The Seven Samurai*, and *Waga seishu n ni kuinashi (No Regrets for My Youth)* 1946.

THE GOLDI (or Golde), more commonly called Nanai, are an aboriginal tribe living in northeastern Siberia. Section 17 of The Aboriginal Peoples of the Russian North web site has several interesting text and photo links dealing with them, including a number of photos taken in 1895 by the American photographer William Henry Jackson: <http://www.yukoncollege.yk.ca/~agraham/nos t202/aborpsru.htm>

Kurosawa wrote:

What is cinema? The answer to this question is no easy matter. Long ago the Japanese novelist Shiga Noya presented an essay written by his grandchild as one of the most remarkable prose pieces of his time. He had it published in a literary magazine. It was entitled "My Dog" and ran as follows: "My dog resembles a bear; he also resembles a badger; he also resembles a fox... ." It proceeded to enumerate the dog's special characteristics, comparing each one to yet another animal, developing into a full list of the animal kingdom. However, the essay closed with, "But since he's a dog, he most resembles a dog." I remember bursting out laughing when I read this essay, but it makes a serious point. Cinema resembles so many other arts. If cinema has very literary characteristics, it also has theatrical qualities, a philosophical side, attributes of painting and sculpture and music elements. But cinema is, in the final analysis, cinema.

The role of director encompasses the coaching of the actors, the cinematography, the sound recoding, the art direction, the music, the editing and the dubbing and sound-mixing. Although these can be thought of as separate occupations, I do not regard them as independent. I see them all melting together under the heading of direction.

With a good script a good director can produce a masterpiece; with the same script a mediocre director can make a passable film. But with a bad script even a good director can't possibly make a good film. For truly cinematic expression, the camera and the microphone must be able to cross both fire and water. That is what makes a real movie. The script must be something that has the power to do this.

Characters in a film have their own existence. The film maker has no freedom. If he insists on his authority and is allowed to manipulate his characters like puppets, the film loses its vitality.

I intended to be a painter before I became involved in film. A curious turn of events, however, brought me to cinema, where I began my present career. When I changed careers, I burnt all the pictures that I had painted up until then. I intended to forget painting once and for all. As a well-known Japanese proverb says, "If you chase two rabbits, you may not catch even one." But since becoming a film director, I have found that drawing rough sketches was often a useful means of explaining ideas to my staff...

When I was young and still an art student, I used to dream of publishing a collection of my paintings or having an exhibition in Paris. These dreams were unexpectedly realized with the publication of my pictures for *Kagemusha*. Life is strange indeed. Now the drawings I made for *Ran* have been made into a collection. Inquiries about exhibitions are coming on from all over the world. It seems like a dream.

I cannot help but be fascinated by the fact that when I tried to paint well, I could only produce mediocre pictures. But when I concentrated on delineating the ideas for my films. I unconsciously produced works that people find interesting.

The best book on Kurosawa's films is the third edition of Donald Ritchie's, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (University of California Press, 1999). With the exception of two chapters, the book is not only a superb analysis of Kurosawa's specific films and general style, but also a superb exploration of how films work. The exceptions are the chapters on *Dodesukaden* and *Dersu Uzala*, which were written by Joan Mellen for the 1979 Japanese edition of the book. Mellen dislikes Kurosawa's subjects in those two films and she sourly faults the films because Kurosawa didn't make the films she would have preferred. But two lousy chapters out of 33 isn't enough to ruin what is otherwise an excellent work. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto also discusses each of the films and Kurosawa's style in *Kurosawa* (Duke Univ. Press, 2000).

Kurosawa's original script and gorgeous story boards for *Ran* were published by Shambhala in 1986. Kurosawa once wrote that he didn't "really like talking about my films. Everything I want to say is in the film itself; for me to say anything more is, as the proverb goes, like 'drawing legs on a picture of a snake.'"

After Jean Renoir, one of his two favorite filmmakers (the other was John Ford) wrote an autobiography, Kurosawa decided it was okay to write about the life that produced the films. His *Something Like an Autobiography* (Knopf, 1982), which is about his life through 1950 (the year of *Rashomon*), is the happy result. Two good web sites devoted to Kurosawa are the Kurosawa Database, www2.tky3web.ne.jp/~adk/kurosawa/AKpage.html and www.carleton.edu/curricular/MEDA/classes/media110/Fitch/index.html

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FADE OUT/FADE IN

That's it for the Spring 2001 Buffalo Film Seminars. Thanks for joining us for these screenings and discussions. We'll be back at the end of August with 14 more great films:

- Aug 29 Buster Keaton & Clyde Bruckman, *The General* 1927
- Sept 4 Georg Pabst, *Pandora's Box* 1929
- Sep 11 Mervyn LeRoy, *Little Caesar* 1930
- Sep 25 Ernst Lubitsch *Trouble in Paradise* 1932
- Oct 2 Preston Sturges, *Sullivan's Travels* 1942
- Oct 9 Michael Powell & Emric Pressburger, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* 1943
- Oct 16 Henri-Georges Clouzot, *Le Salaire de la peur/Wages of Fear* 1953
- Oct 23 Charles Laughton, *The Night of the Hunter* 1955
- Oct 30 Alexander Mackendrick, *Sweet Smell of Success* 1957
- Nov 6 Luchino Visconti, *Il Gattopardo/The Leopard* 1963
- Nov 13 Bernardo Bertolucci, *Il Conformista/The Conformist*, 1970
- Nov 20 Nicolas Roeg, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* 1976
- Nov 27 Terrence Malick, *Days of Heaven* 1978
- Dec 4 Terry Gilliam *The Adventure of Baron Munchausen* 1988

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for information on WNED's Buffalo Niagara Guitar Festival, June 14-17, go to www.buffaloniagaraguitarfestival.com/

for information on the June 8-17 WNED Buffalo Niagara Guitar Festival Film Series, go to www.buffaloguitar.com