Directed by Kon Ichikawa  
Based on the novel by Michio Takeyama  
Screenplay by Natto Wada  
Produced by Masayuki Takaki  
Original Music by Akira Ifukube  
Cinematography by Minoru Yokoyama  
Film Editing by Masanori Tsujii

Rentarō Mikuni...Captain Inouye  
Shōji Yasui...Mizushima  
Jun Hamamura...Ito  
Taketoshi Naitō...Kobayashi  
Shunji Kasuga...Maki  
Kô Nishimura...Baba;  
Keishichi Nakahara...Takagi  
Toshiaki Ito...Hashimoto  
Hiroshi Tsuchikata...Okada  
Tomio Aoki...Oyama  
Nobuteru Hanamura...Nakamura

Kon Ichikawa, **BIRUMA NO TATEGOTO**/**THE BURMESE HARP** (1956, 116 min)

KON ICHIKAWA (20 November 1915, Mie, Japan—13 February 2008, Tokyo, Japan, pneumonia) direct 89 films, the last of which was **Inugamike no ichizoku/The nugami Clan** (2006). Some of the others were **Kah-chan/Bib Mama** (2001), **Yatsuhaka-mura/The Tomb Village** (1996), **Shijushichinin no shikaku/47 Ronin** (1994), **Taketori monogatari/Princess from the Moon** (1987), **Biruma no tategoto/The Burmese Harp** (1985), **Joobachi/Queen Bee** (1978), **Kyoto (1969)**, **Tôkyô orimpikku/Tokyo Olympiad** (1965), **Yukinojo henge/An Actor’s Revenge** (1963), **Nobi/Fires on the Plain** (1959), **Biruma no tategoto/The Burmese Harp** (1956), **Aoiro kakumi/The Blue Revolution** (1953), **Seppuku/Harakiri** (1962), **Yoku/Avarice** (1958), **Biruma no tategoto/The Burmese Harp** (1956), **Aijin/The Lovers** (1953), and **Tsuma/Wife** (1953).


JUN HAMAMURA (7 February 1906, Fukuoka, Japan—21 June 1995, Setagaya, Tokyo) appeared in 123 films, the last of which was **Nemuru otoko/Sleeping Man** (1996). Some of the others were **Kappa/Water Creature** (1994), **Maihime/The Dancer** (1989), **Taketori monogatari/Princess from the Moon** (1987), **Makai tenshô/Samurai Reincarnation** (1981), **Nosutoradamusu no daiyogen/The Last Days of Planet Earth** (1974), **Kaidan**/**Ghost Stories** (1964), **Seppuku/Harakiri** (1962), and **Ningen no jôken/Human Condition II: Road to Eternity** (1959), **Nobi//Fires**
on the Plain (1959), Biruma no tategoto/The Burmese Harp (1956), Okami/Wolf (1955), and Makiba monogatari (1938).


Kon Ichikawa, Japanese director and scenarist, was born at Uji Yamada, Mie Prefecture. His health was poor as a child, and he devoted much of his leisure to drawing and painting, envisaging a career as an artist. His other obsession was the cinema, and when he saw his first Disney cartoons he realized that he could combine the two—"Seeing Mickey Mouse and Sill Symphony," he says, "I realized that pictures and film were deeply organically related. All right, I decided, I'm going to make animated films too."

In 1933 Ichikawa graduated from Ichika Commercial School in Osaka and joined the J.O. Film Studios in Kyoto, which had its own small animation department. Before long, he was the animation department, scripting cartoons, supervising the painting and photography, and editing the results singlehanded. In due course, J.O. established a feature department, where Ichikawa worked a assistant under four directors of whom the best known was Yutaka Abe. In the late 1930s the company merged with another called P.L.C. to form the Toho film company, with studios in Tokyo.

Ichikawa made his first film for Toho at the end of the Pacific War—an adaptation of a Kabuki play called Musume Dojôji (A Girl at the Dojo Temple, 1946), about a dancer who sacrificed herself so that her beloved son can cast a new temple bell. Originally planned as an animated film, it was made with puppets instead because of the wartime labor shortage. It was completed just after the war but was confiscated by the American occupation authorities, who were at first uneasy about anything drawing on Japanese traditions. The film was subsequently lost.

In 1947, some of Toho's employees broke away to form a new company, Shin Toho, which celebrated its birth with a portmanteau film to which Ichikawa contributed some footage. His first surviving solo work, however, was Hana hiraku (A Flower Blooms, 1948), starring Ken Uehara and Hideke Takamine in a melodramatic story about a rich girl who becomes infatuated with a militant student but realizes her mistake when he makes another student pregnant. The movie was based on a novel by Yaeko Nogami, and its cinematic possibilities were pointed out to Ichikawa by Natto Wada, a freelance scenarist who later became his wife. She joined Shin Toho in 1949 and for many years, there and elsewhere, was Ichikawa's closest collaborator.

Most of Ichikawa's early films were literary adaptations assigned by his employers. He has explained how he and his wife would "live with" a project over a period of months, reading the assigned text and discussing together the most promising cinematic approach, the characters and settings. Natto Wada would then incorporate all these ideas into her script. Ichikawa says his wife "is very meticulous, so she always did a complete and beautifully detailed scenario."

Working in this way, he poured out a stream of about a dozen melodramas and action films for Shin Toho in 1948-1951 and then, rejoining Toho, began to specialize in romantic comedies and satires. The first of his pictures to attract much attention was Pu-san (Mr. Pu, 1953), inspired by Taizo Yoyyama's famous comic strip. Yunosuke Ito plays a good-hearted schoolteacher at a Tokyo cram school, an aging Candide in the grasping materialistic world of postwar Japan. Innocently involved in a political demonstration, he loses his job and winds up on the assembly line at an arms factory, while Colonel Gotsu, a former war criminal who is now a corrupt politician, makes a fortune by selling his memoirs.

This is an extremely funny but deeply nihilistic satire. Apart from the hero and a devoted nurse who looks after him when he is run down by a truck, it has no sympathetic characters. Members of the Diet, communists, students, and everyone else are shown to be rude, greedy, hypocritical, and ruthless—totally corrupted by the traumas of the war and the occupation. Everywhere there are sign of rearmament and militarization; war criminals are back in power; gangsters run even the educational system. In this ugly new Japan, there is no time or room for good manners and the old values; decency and humility are weaknesses, and the weak go to the wall.

Other satires followed in 1953-1954, including notably Aioo rakume (The Blue Revolution, 1953), about a rather Pu-like academic, and Okuman choja (A Billionaire, 1954). The latter centers on another Candide-like figure—a tyro tax inspector of disastrous honesty. Sent to investigate a case of tax evasion, he discovers that the offenders live half-starved in a hovel with eighteen children and an insane non-paying boarder who is building an atomic bomb in her room. The hero eventually accepts a small bribe, but then is so guilt-ridden that he confesses and attempts suicide, in the process accidentally exposing a politician's huge tax fraud.

Films like this, showing that there is one law for the poor and none for the rich, established Ichikawa as a "spokesman for the postwar frustration felt by the little man." But at the same time he was turning out light comedies and an occasional melodrama, and he acknowledges that his work has no unifying theme: "I just make any picture I like or any that the company tells me to do." Politically engaged critics sometimes dismiss him on this account as no more than a talented hack—the director Nagisa Oshima maintains that "he's just an illustrator." Ichikawa, an immensely modest man, is in fact quite happy to accept this view of his work, and indeed, as Audie Bok points out, "It was with the intention to illustrate that he began his filmmaking career."

Most, however, have a much higher opinion of Ichikawa's achievement, and —since critics are generally more at ease with
“serious” films than comedies—this view gathered strength with the darker movies he began to make in 1955, when he left Toho and joined Nikkatsu. The first of these was Kokoro (The Heart, 1955), based on a novel by Soseki Natsume about a man who, as a young student, had driven his best friend to suicide by stealing his girlfriend, but whose marriage to this woman is so blighted by guilt that at last, in middle age, he takes his own life also.

Kokoro was said to be “conceived like a quartet,” and was much praised for its “beautiful monochrome shadowy interiors and stark landscapes.” But Ichikawa’s sense of irony—a rare quality in a Japanese director—is irrepressible, and even in this bleak film there are humorous touches, like the lethargic messenger who delivers a tragic telegram half asleep, and the proud mother who keeps making ineffectual efforts to display her son’s university diploma.

And in 1956 came Ichikawa’s first major success, Biruma no tategoto (The Burmese Harp), very sensitively adapted by Natto Wada from the novel by Michio Takeyama. It has Shoji Yasui as Mizushima, a young Japanese soldier-musician in Burma at the end of the Second World War. The remains of his unit are prisoners of the British, but some of their comrades are still fighting in the mountains, and Mizushima, appalled by the waste, volunteers to seek them out and persuade them to surrender. Invoking their promise to die for the Emperor, they refuse and are wiped out.

Mizushima himself is almost killed but is rescued and healed by a Buddhist monk. Intent on rejoining his unit for repatriation, he steals the monk’s robe, and, thus disguised, sets off. But on the way back he finds himself increasingly possessed by the role he has assumed, and disturbed by the numberless corpses of his comrades that lie unburied and unmourned on foreign soil—the ultimate horror for a Japanese soldier. By the time he gets back to his imprisoned unit, he has decided to refuse repatriation and to stay behind in Burma to bury the dead and to pray for their souls.

As Joan Mellen says, “Mizushima has decided to sacrifice loyalty to a single group for devotion to a larger entity;” and “his decision becomes an affirmation of what it means to be Japanese. Mizushima will unite himself with the family of ancestors comprised of these dead.” And in fact Ichikawa goes beyond this transcendent notion of nationalism to celebrate the greater community of mankind. Burmese and English are spoken in the film as well as Japanese, and there is a powerfully affecting scene when, the fighting at an end, the Japanese greet the enemy with a song beloved of soldiers almost everywhere—and the British troops sing the song back in English out of the darkness.

Joan Mellen has very mixed feelings about this picture. In The Waves at Genji’s Door she compares it unfavorably with Kobayashi’s antiwar films, saying that it whitewashes the Japanese troops and reveals Ichikawa’s “lack of consistent point of view or personal commitment.” But she allows that he had resisted the temptation to caricature the British and goes on: “The deepest beauty of...[The Burmese Harp] derives from the character of Mizushima, who scarcely utters a word throughout...in his magnificent last confrontation with the troop, Mizushima faces his former comrades from behind the barbed wire of their camp on the night before their departure. At first they cheer wildly, believing that he has returned and will go home with them after all. On his Burmese harp he plays, tenderly and gently, ‘There’s No Place Luke Home.’ Without words he affirms that he has not ceased to love either them or Japan...Then he is gone. This may be the most moving scene in the history of the Japanese film.” John Simon was equally impressed by Ichikawa’s delicate apprehension of “the intimate role a musical instrument can play in the psychic development of a man.”

The Burmese Harp came fifth in Kinema Jumpo’s annual poll of Japan’s “Ten Best Films” and won the San Giorgio Prize at Venice for what it says about “men’s capacity to live with one another.” Ichikawa then returned to the Daiei production company, for whom he had directed one film in 1952, to make a variety of comedies, satires, and thrillers, including the controversial sex-and-violence drama Shokei no heya (Punishment Room, 1956), based on Shintaro Ishihara’s novel about the privileged, aimless teenagers who haunt Japan’s beaches during the summer. Manin densha (A Full-Up Train, 1957) deals by contrast with a good boy—a bright-eyed college graduate who is reduced to a nervous wreck by the demands of the high-pressure job he must take to support his old-fashioned family. Behind the bitter, exaggerated jokes, Audie Bock observed, “are the growing pains of postwar Japan.”

In the same year, Ichikawa also directed the interesting and quite different Tohoku no zummutachi (The Men of Tohoku, 1957), his only work for Toho during this period. The film, based on a story by Fukuzawa, is set in the northern mountains in a strange community where only the eldest sons can marry, the younger being condemned to servitude and celibacy. The hero, thus deprived, is further handicapped by stinking breath. In the end, he sets out for a legendary land beyond the mountains where there are only women, and a magic mushroom grows that cures halitosis...Ichikawa wrote the script himself, for the first time using the pseudonym “Christie.” (He is addicted to foreign thrillers, and his pen name is a tribute to Agatha Christie, who in his opinion should have won the Nobel Prize.)

Ichikawa’s next major film was Enjo (Conflagration, 1958), adapted from Yukio Mishima’s novel Kinkakuji, itself based on an actual event. Set in postwar Japan, it centers on Mizoguchi (Raiko Ichikawa), a young man whose mother’s open promiscuity has induced in him a sense of inferiority that expresses itself in his acute stammer. Mizoguchi becomes a Buddhist acolyte at the exquisite Temple of the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto, a symbol for him of all that is pure and perfect—both an inspiration and a reproach. But even there, he finds, corruption and hypocrisy are rampant, and finally, in a desperate act of purgation, he burns the temple down. The story is told in flashback as Mizoguchi is interrogated by the police, and the film ends with his suicide—he jumps from a train on the way to jail for arson.

“The visuals of the film are superb,” wrote Donald Ritchie. “Ichikawa and [his cameraman] Kazuo Miyagawa...used the wide-screen in an intelligent and creative manner, and the textures captured in black and white were—even for Japan—beyond comparison. Particularly impressive was the use of architecture....Other elements in the catastrophe are introduced
with equal force and in purely visual terms, as when Ichikawa cuts from one time frame to another to adumbrate the connections in Mizoguchi’s anguish psyche between the Temple, his despised mother, and the corrupting presence in Kyoto of the victorious American forces. This remains Ichikawa’s own favorite among his films.

Kagi (Odd Obsession, 1959), very loosely based on a novel by Junichiro Tanizaki, is an ironic, claustrophobic, and intensely beautiful study of erotic obsession...This was followed by an antiwar film even more successful than The Burmese Harp, one that placed second in the Kinema Jumpo poll. Nobi (Fires on the Plain, 1959) is based on the novel by Shohei Ooka, with a spare script by Natto Wada that relies more on images than on dialogue. It deals with the plight of the Japanese forces on the Leyte-Philippine front in 1945. There is no food, and the wounded are turned away from field hospitals unless they can supply their own rations. The Americans are presented as ruthless killers who murder prisoners for pleasure, and native guerrillas hunt down those who escape capture on the barren plain.

The film’s hero is Private Tamura (Eiji Funakoshi), a decent man who is driven to eating leeches and soiled earth, but is horrified enough to kill when he discovers that his comrades, half insane with hunger, are eating human flesh. Tamura finds that, even in his extremity, he would rather die than surrender his humanity in his way, and walks unarmed into an enemy attack that he cannot survive. Joan Mellen calls this a “fiercely expressionistic” film “unrelenting in its criticism of the Japanese army,” and goes on: “Throughout the film Ichikawa unrelentingly imposes images exposing the grotesque barbarism of war...[but] maintains a distance that refuses to permit his film any easy voyeurism or enjoyment of horror for its own sake....In a film daring in its depiction of cannibalism, he argues that the real horror is...the atrocity of war itself.”

...Time and again Miyagawa’s superlative photography redeems the most sordid objects and actions, seeming to insist that there is beauty everywhere.

...The director’s ability to make bricks without straw has never been better demonstrated than in Yukinojo henge (An Actor’s Revenge, 1963), the third screen version of a well-known tearjerker by Otokichi Mikami. ...As Donal Richie puts it, giving Ichikawa his film any easy moral or political meaning as “Kagi” or “Nobi,” then “started all over on my own.” Joan Mellen says that “of all Japanese directors, Ichikawa affects the most aesthetic distance from his subject.” Wh

Ichikawa’s models include Mizoguchi, Ozu, Kurosawa, Kinoshita, and Pasolini, who became f

The next year Ichikawa remade his 1956 classic Birumo no Tategoto (The Burmese Harp) in color and CinemaScope. Many critics found the result “corny and dated” (Jeff Baskin, who added, it doesn’t know where to stop”), but the remake was nevertheless selected as the closing film for the first Tokyo International Film Festival. Released around the fortieth anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it became a surprise blockbuster...

Ichikawa’s models include Mizoguchi, Ozu, Kurosawa, Kinoshita, and Pasolini, who became for him the greatest of modern filmmakers: he studied their work carefully, he says, and then “started all over on my own.” Joan Mellen says that “of all Japanese directors, Ichikawa affects the most aesthetic distance from his subject.” While acknowledging that he is “one of the great craftsmen of the Japanese cinema,” she finds too many of Ichikawa’s films “shallow and devoid of any serious content.” Others regard him as an artist and humanist of the calibre of Ozu.


James Quant Introduction: Ichikawa the Innovator, or the Complicated Case of Kon Ichikawa.

“ICHIKAWA, THE MASTER OF PARADOX.”—LANDON DEWEY

Judging the accomplishment of Kon Ichikawa is more difficult than that of perhaps any other Japanese director. In a career
extending from the mid-thirties to the present, he has made almost eighty films, widely variant in genre, theme, style and tone—alternately, often simultaneously, sardonic and sentimental, deadpan and apocalyptic. Perhaps because many have never been subtitled and only a handful have been distributed in the West, Ichikawa’s reputation here now rests on fewer than ten films, most from one decade: three classics of postwar humanist cinema (Fires on the Plains, Harp of Burma, Enjo), two social comedies based on Junichiro Tanizaki novels (Kagi, The Makioka Sisters), the wild comic spectacle An Actor’s Revenge, and the documentary, Tokyo Olympiad, which has been released in many versions and continues to be the subject of considerable controversy. The problems of apprehension and evaluation posed by the diversity and magnitude of Ichikawa’s oeuvre are compounded by other factors, notably the formidable influence of his wife and scenarist, Natto Wada, whose withdrawal from writing his scripts in the mid-sixties marked a turning point in his career; and the difficulties he encountered with the studios, who occasionally punished his failures and transgressions by assigning him dubious projects, or hired him only on “salvage operations.” Among the postwar Japanese masters, Ichikawa has long been an unlikely candidate for analysis; critical and curatorial interest increasingly focuses on the “expressive margins” of Japanese cinema, and even if not always anti-canonical, has ignored or denigrated Ichikawa as an opportunist, dandy, or mere stylist. (French critics, with an innate anti-auteurist bias, have largely disregarded his work, whereas British critics were the first to champion 1.) A similar preference for the extremes of the transcendental and domestic, or the kinetic and wanton, in Japanese film, forms a continuum on which Ichikawa’s films can rarely be situated, further averting attention from him. While often referred to as a link between “the golden age” of Japanese cinema and the New Wave, Ichikawa has rarely been given his due as an innovator; his stylistic and thematic experiments deserve greater critical attention than they have hitherto received.

The monist impulse of auteurism tends to suppress multiplicity by ignoring or explaining away variation; if unable to do either, it devalues the filmmaker whose diversity cannot be tamed or taxonomized. Perhaps this is why, of the four Japanese directors first acknowledged in the west as masters—Kenji Mizoguchi, Yasujiro Ozu, Akira Kurosawa, and Kon Ichikawa—the last is the least recognized, though he is the only one of the quartet still alive, and despite his advanced age, is still extraordinarily prolific. The categories imposed on Ichikawa’s work have often been broad grids of tone or genre, following the director’s own early division of his work into films that are “light”—“my Disney side,” he calls it—and those that are “dark.” This simple antinomy is complicated, as so much is in the case of Ichikawa, by paradox and peculiarity. There are not two sides to Ichikawa, but several, as the title of Donald Richie’s influential early essay on the director suggests. As is frequently pointed out by both Ichikawa and his commentators, his apprenticeship in manga films and animation (anime) shaped his approach to narrative structure and visual composition, which tends to be both graphically organized, asymmetrical and dynamic, cursive in its articulation. His most recent films, the animated doll feature Shinsegumi, and Dora-Heita, a long-endured personal project, based on a thirty-year-old script co-written by Ichikawa, Kinoshita, Kurosawa, and Kobayashi, suggest a return to his roots. In Dora-

Heita’s determinedly old-fashioned, crafty recreation of the samurai genre, Ichikawa’s tale of an “alley cat” magistrate who dispenses wisdom and havoc as he cleans up a corrupt fiefdom characteristically mixes tones and devices—slapstick and philosophy, moral drama and ribaldry, frantic action and formal, static compositions, period detail and synthesized music. Ichikawa predictably denies any retrospective intent in these two films; He tells Mark Schilling in an interview conducted for this book: “I’m only interested in making films that excite me, that I can make in my own way. That’s all….Films are films. If you don’t understand that, then you start filming lies.”...

Ichikawa: I still think that silent films are the summit of film art. I am so sorry that I was not able to make a silent film myself because I was born too late.

Mori: I didn’t know you were so infatuated with making a silent film. What did you think about foreign films?

Ichikawa: I admired Ernst Lubitsch, especially his Design for Living, a story of three men involved with one woman. The film was very subtle, and the refined and tasteful direction produced high-class eroticism. The cast was gorgeous, too: Miriam Hopkins, Gary Cooper and Frederic March. In contrast, Lubitsch’s The Man I Killed was a very serious drama. Both were excellent. I also liked John Ford’s The Informer, Fritz Lang’s You Only Live Once, Frank Capra’s It Happened One Night, Willi Forst’s Leise flehen meine Lieder. I later learned many things from, or simply enjoyed, Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s A Letter to Three Wives, Orson Welles’s Citizen Kane, Jean Renoir’s The River, Jean Cocteau’s La Belle et la bête.Usual

Donald Richie “The Several Sides of Kon Ichikawa”

There is another side to Ichikawa. Animation stops, the funny stories cease, and he simply sits, cigarette dangling, his eyes large and sad behind his glasses. This is the Ichikawa who made Harp of Burma, and went on to complete his best pictures.

“Burma—oh, but I wanted to make that film. That was the first film I really felt I had to make.”...

Ichikawa’s sense of anguish has caused him endless difficulties with those motion picture companies in particular—who insist that life is fun and humanity happy. He has got into some kind of troubles with every company he has ever worked for, and particularly serious were those with Daiei’s Masaki Naga (Japan’s L. B. Mayer, and the man who walked out of the screening of his own Rashomon) who, to punish the director of Kagi, insisted that he make the blockbuster The Great Wall of China. Ichikawa refused and was suspended. Relations between the
two strained to the snapping point, and then, in the local uproar over the Olympic picture (the committee had wanted a straight newssreal), they snapped.

"Of course, there is another reason for my troubles," says Ichikawa. "Any director who is any good has to be an absolutist. Like Kurosawa. Both of us fight like anything to get what we want and that is why we both have the same reputation with the film companies. You know—uncooperative, stubborn, wasteful, etc."

"The other reason that I try to visualize everything is that I'm the kind of person who has to see something—even in my own imagination—before I understand it. I started as a painter and I still think like one. That is why the camera is so important to me. I plan all the set-ups and I always check the framing, and I usually try to work with someone I know and like, a cameraman such as Kazuo Miyagawa who did Bonchi and Enjo and Kagi, as well as Rashomon, Ugetsu, and Ozu's Floating Weeds or Yijuichi Nagano [a discovery of Susumu Hani's, who was cameraman on the Olympic film]. I design the sets too, usually—it was fun doing the Genji ones—and I'd probably do the music too if I could. I don't know much about music but I'm thinking of going to school and learning."

One of the results of this intense visualization is what has come to be known in the industry as "the Ichikawa look." It owes much less to traditional art than it does to modern graphic design. The angular pattern is usually bold, the balance is almost always asymmetrical, the framing is precise, and yet the composition rarely calls attention to itself. Here the "cartoon" influence is seen strongly, not specifically Disney but those animated films (UPA was an early example) which were designed by graphic artists.

... "People are always surprised at my humour and then they are always surprised at the bleakness of whatever philosophy I have. To me they seem perfectly complementary. All sides of a person add up to that person, you know. Somebody called the Olympic picture a 'hymn to life,' and that I guess is what I am about. I'm only guessing though. I can't define it any better than I have in my films. After all, a director only has his films to talk with. If he doesn't get through then he hasn't made the film very well or it hasn't been looked at very well."

Joan Mellen "Interview with Kon Ichikawa"

Mellen: Which European and American films or directors most affected you?

Ichikawa: I should mention the names of filmmakers who moved me very much rather than individual titles. Among them, in America, Charlie Chaplin stands out, as does William Wellman. In France, René Clair. Nor can I forget Sternberg and Lubitsch.

"The Uniqueness of Kon Ichikawa: A Symposium" Kon Ichikawa, Akira Iwasaki, Kyushiro Kusakabe

Kusakabe: The purpose of this series of symposiums is to discover unknown faces of various films. The films of Kon Ichikawa are the subject of today's discussion, which may prove interesting since we have you here with us, Mr. Ichikawa.

Ichikawa: I don't really understand myself, so I'll just smile.

"Kon Ichikawa at Eighty-six: A "Mid-Career" Interview" Mark Schilling

This interview with Kon Ichikawa took place on July 7, 2000 at the director's home. A short taxi ride from Shibuya, a Tokyo entertainment district packed with seething crowds of under-twenty-fives most hours of the day and night. Ichikawa's neighborhood is quiet, sedate, wealthy. His house, situated on a rise and flanked by high concrete walls, is barely visible from the street, much like a medieval castle keep.

The house itself, however, is less sixteenth century Japan than modern-day California, with its small but immaculately kept lawn, white exterior and large plate-glass windows. Greeting us at the door, Ichikawa was welcoming but a bit wary; he was not altogether sure about the purpose of the interview.

After introductions and explanations, however, he answered our questions with the briskness and conciseness of the director as get-it-done dynamo. Impatient with inquiries related to the longevity of his career, or the wisdom he had supposedly gained thereby—he released his first film in 1948—he plunged into discussions about the process of filmmaking with frankness and enthusiasm.

ICHIKAWA: Television and films both basically look at life and human beings through a frame. From a director's point of view, they aren't much different in that regard. But in terms of style, there is a big difference. With films, the audience has made a choice to be sitting there in the dark. With television, I'm sitting here in my own house and the TV is telling me to watch something, whether I particularly want to or not. So there is a difference in that way. You have to change your method of filming accordingly.

SCHILLING: Technically, in terms of picture quality, films and TV are becoming more alike.

ICHIKAWA: That's true. Technically they are getting closer, but film is still film and television, television. Even with high-definition video, there is still a big difference in the way you go about filming—at least that's what I think. For example, with a TV drama, you have to do a lot of explaining—you have to tell the audience what is going on very directly. That's because they're sitting at home watching. With television, the phone is ringing, people are talking, drinking tea, and doing various other things. You're bringing this program to them, in the midst of their daily lives. You have to be aware of that. When I'm on the set, I'm not so aware of it, but I am conscious that some kind of explanation is necessary. With film, you're freer—you can create your own world. I'm not saying, though, that because you're making TV you can cheapen the content. Even with TV drama, you're examining life and human beings. So the basic approach is not all that
different (between films and TV dramas). With both, you have something to say, a theme you want to express. Stylistically, though, they’re somewhat different….

ICHIKAWA: I’ve made about seventy films—that’s a lot. When I was at my peak, I was making as many as three films a year. More than half of those films, though, were not ones I wanted to make, but ones that a company or producer or actor asked me to make. “I want to do this, so let’s get Ichikawa.” In that case, the problem becomes one of how to film the material. In other words, it’s not material I have developed myself, but that someone has brought to me. Even so, I have to do everything possible to make it my own. I have to ask myself whether the material allows me to do that. If I can’t put my own stamp on it, I turn down the assignment. I feel a sense of responsibility for the assignments I take on. At the same time, if I can’t make the material my own, I’ll say no. I’ve made some dogs doing that. “Oh no—what have I done!”—that kind of thing. (Laughs) But that’s the way I make films. If something resonates within me when I read a certain piece of literature, I want to make it into a movie. That’s how I make a novel mine….

SCHILLING: When you read a novel, are the images more important than the words?

ICHIKAWA: More than the images, I’m looking for the spirit behind the words, the spirit of what the author wrote. You first have to understand what the author was trying to say. Then you have to ask yourself whether you agree with it, whether it makes sense to you. Those ideas are in the story; it’s not necessary to think about the story per se. …

SCHILLING: You made one other war film prior to Fires on the Plain, Harp of Burma (1956). That also had a big impact. Then nearly twenty years later, in 1985, you remade it in colour. Did you want to communicate the film’s anti-war message to a new generation?

ICHIKAWA: Yes, that’s partly why. For young people today, the hero is a wonderful man, an ideal Japanese….

SCHILLING: As you know, a series of your films is going on tour in North America and Europe. Is there one film that you especially want foreign audiences to see?

ICHIKAWA: I can’t say. When I make a film, I never think about taking it to a foreign film festival or have foreigners watch it. When I make a film, it’s for me. Of course, because I’m a Japanese I naturally want to screen it in Japan, but I never think that I want to show it in America or France, or Africa.

SCHILLING: No interest in the foreign market then?

ICHIKAWA: Not really. But films—I know I’m not saying anything original here—are a world language. That’s what they should be, anyway. People of whatever race wonder about what happiness is, what life is and wrestle with those questions in the films they make. Even so, I never think about having people in America or Europe watch this or that film of mine. My films may be difficult for them to understand because of differences in culture or language or customs, but that can’t be helped. Cinematic styles change. After the war there was Italian neorealism, then the French New Wave, Various new approaches came in. We were influenced by all of them. And it’s true that the way we made movies changed as a result. What hasn’t changed is the basic way we look at human beings. Mores and manners change, the cut of a suit changes, but the way we look at human beings doesn’t change so much.

COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2010 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XX:

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...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addtoList@buffalofilmseminars.com
...for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the Market Arcade Film & Arts Center and State University of New York at Buffalo with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News
14th ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FILM FESTIVAL
FEBRUARY 11 - MARCH 25, 2010
SCREENINGS: Thursdays at 7 p.m., Market Arcade Film & Arts Center, 639 Main St. TICKETS: $9 general admission / $5 for students, seniors, and Hallwalls members (Your ticket purchase helps support women filmmakers, providing income through the rental costs we pay for their work.)

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 11
Daughters of the Dust  dir: Julie Dash, USA, 1991, 112 min. feature (35mm). A film of spellbinding visual beauty and brilliant resonant performances, Julie Dash’s Daughters Of The Dust has become a landmark of independent film. With great lyricism, Daughters tells the story of a large African-American family as it prepares to move North at the dawn of the 20th Century. Daughters brings to life the unique culture of the Gullah people, descendants of slaves who live on the Sea Islands off Georgia, while addressing the changing values, conflicts and struggles that confront every family as they leave their homeland for the promise of a new and better future. [Watch the trailer.]

Hair Piece: A Film for Nappy Headed People  dir: Ayoka Chenzira, USA, 1985, 10 min. (DVD) This spirited animated short examines how African-American women and girls respond to Western standards of beauty through their hairstyles.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18
The Apple  dir: Samira Mahmalbaf, Iran, 1998, 86 min. Feature (35mm). Iranian Filmmaker Samir Mahmalbaf was only 17 when she made this award-winning debut feature. Following the Iranian film style that proves reality is almost always stranger than fiction, an entire family play themselves in this true story about two girls who are imprisoned by their father for the first 12 years of their lives. “The Apple” follows the girls after they are released and experiencing the outside world for the first time.

A Vida Politica  dir: Kat Mansoor, UK, 12 min. (DVD) These four short films explore four Brazilian activists’ innovative ways of bringing hidden issues into the public domain. “Body” looks at a fashion shoot for an ironic fashion label run by sex workers; “Voice” follows political efforts by the head of the Domestic Workers Association; “Art” shows street theater used to campaign for abortion rights; and “Image” explores the ways in which black women use their hair as a vehicle for wider political activism.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25
Co-sponsored by the UB Haudenosaunee-Native American Studies Research Group
Club Native  dir: Tracey Deer, Mohawk (Canada), 2008, 78 min. Documentary (DVD) In Kahnawake, the hometown of Mohawk director Tracey Deer, there are two unspoken rules: Don’t marry a non-Native, and never, ever have a child with a non-Native. In a community where tribal membership rests on the equivocal measurement of blood quantum (literally the measurement of blood “purity”), following one’s heart requires risking one’s Mohawk status, as well as one’s family and community.

The Shirt  dir: Shelley Niro, Mohawk (Canada) 2003, 6 min. (DV). This film is an ironic narrative/performance chronicling of the effects of colonialism on native people in North America.

THURSDAY, MARCH 4
A co-presentation with Experimental TV Center & Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center
The Heretics  dir: Joan Braderman (IN PERSON!) USA, 2009, 91 min. Documentary (DV). Director Joan Braderman will answer questions about her first-person account of the feminist collective and art journal, Heresies. At the epicenter of the 1970s art world in lower Manhattan, Heresies played a pivotal role in the Women’s Movement. The Heretics combines intimate contemporary interviews with the artists, archival footage, and documents, all framed by striking digital motion graphics.

THURSDAY, MARCH 18
XXY  dir: Lucia Puenzo, Argentina, 2007, 86 min. Feature (35mm). Alex is a 15-year old intersex child who lives in seclusion with her parents in a fishing village in Uruguay in order to escape harassment in her hometown of Buenos Aires. Alex is raised as a girl. At birth, her parents decided against medical interventions. One weekend, friends from the city with their 15-year old son visit, setting the stage for sometimes violent confrontations around sexuality, gender and identity.

It Wasn’t Love  dir: Sadie Benning, USA, 1992, 20 min. (mini-dv). Benning illustrates a lustful encounter with a "bad girl" through the gender posturing and genre interplay of Hollywood stereotypes: the rebel, the platinum blonde, the gangster, the 50’s crooner, and the vamp. As Benning states, "It wasn't love, but it was something..."

THURSDAY, MARCH 25
Rust Belt Reels: A Night of Short Films Original films made by women from “post-industrial” cities in the United States. (mini-dv)