



**Directed by** Akira Kurosawa

**Written by** Eijirô Hisaita, Ryuzo Kikushima, Akira Kurosawa, and Hideo Oguni

**Based on** *King's Ransom* by Ed McBain (Evan Hunter)

**Produced by** Ryuzo Kikushima and Tomoyuki Tanaka

**Original Music by** Masaru Satô

**Cinematography by** Asakazu Nakai and Takao Saitô

**Toshirô Mifune**...Kingo Gondo

**Tatsuya Nakadai**...Chief Detective Tokura

**Kyôko Kagawa**...Reiko Gondo

**Tatsuya Mihashi**...Kawanishi, Gondo's secretary

**Isao Kimura**...Detective Arai

**Kenjiro Ishiyama**...Chief Detective 'Bos'n' Taguchi

**Takeshi Katô**...Detective Nakao

**Takashi Shimura**...Chief of Investigation Section

**Jun Tazaki**...Kamiya, National Shoes Publicity Director

**Nobuo Nakamura**...Ishimaru, National Shoes Design Department Director

**Yûnosuke Itô**...Baba, National Shoes executive

**AKIRA KUROSAWA** (March 23, 1910, Tokyo, Japan—September 6, 1998, Setagaya, Tokyo, Japan) has 70 writing credits and 33 directing credits). He received an honorary Oscar in 1990. Some of his films are *Madadayo/Not Yet* (1993), *Hachi-gatsu no kyôshikyoku/Rhapsody in August* (1991), *Dreams* (1990), *Ran* (1985), *Kagemusha the Shadow Warrior* (1980), *Dersu Uzala* (1975), *Dodesukaden/Clickety-Clack* (1970), *Akahige/Red Beard* (1965), *Tengoku to jigoku/High and Low* (1963), *Tsubaki Sanjûrô* (1962), *Yojimbo/The Bodyguard* (1961), *Warui yatsu hodo yoku nemuru/The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), *Kakushi-toride no san-akunin/The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *Donzoko/The Lower Depths* (1957), *Kumonosu jô/Throne of Blood* (1957), *Ikimono no kiroku/I Live in Fear* (1955), *Shichinin no samurai/The Seven Samurai* (1954), *Ikiru/To Live* (1952), *Hakuchi/The Idiot* (1951), *Rashômon/In the Woods* (1950), *Nora inu/Stray Dog* (1949), *Yoidore tenshi/Drunken Angel* (1948), and *Sugata Sanshiro* (1943).

[**bold titles** in the lists below are films directed by Kurosawa]

**TOSHIRÔ MIFUNE** (April 1, 1920, Tsingtao, China—December 24, 1997, Tokyo, Japan) has 181 acting credits, some of which are *Fukai kawa/Deep River* (1995), *Picture Bride* (1994), *Shadow of*



*the Wolf* (1992), *Kabuto/Journey of Honor* (1991), *Sutoroberi rodo/Strawberry Road* (1991), *Sen no Rikyu/Death of a Tea Master* (1989), *Sicilian Connection* (1987), *Seiha/The Conquest* (1982), "Shogun" (1980), *Ako-Jo danzetsu/The Fall of Ako Castle* (1978), *Yagyû ichizoku no inbô/The Shogun's Samurai* (1978), *Midway* (1976), *Paper Tiger* (1975), *Soleil rouge/Red Sun* (1971), *Machibuse/Ambush* (1970), *Shinsengumi/Band of Assassins* (1969), *Akage/Red Lion* (1969), *Hell in the Pacific* (1968), *Jôi-uchi: Hairyo tsuma shimatsu/Rebellion* (1967), ***Akahige/Red Beard*** (1965), *Samurai* (1965), *Dai tozoku/The Lost World of Sinbad* (1963), ***Tengoku to jigoku/High and Low*** (1963), *Taiheiyo no tsubasa/Attack Squadron!* (1963), *Chushingura - Hana no maki yuki no maki/47 Ronin* (1962), *Tsubaki Sanjûrô* (1962), *Yojimbo/The Bodyguard* (1961), *Warui yatsu hodo yoku nemuru/The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), *Hawai Middouei daikaikusen: Taiheiyo no arashi/I Bombed Pearl Harbor* (1960), *Ankokugai no taiketsu/The Last Gunfight* (1960), ***Kakushi-toride no san-akunin/The Hidden Fortress*** (1958), *Kumonosu jô/Throne of Blood* (1957), *Tsuma no kokoro/A Wife's Heart* (1956), *Ikimono no kiroku/I Live in Fear* (1955), *Miyamoto Musashi/Master Swordsman* (1954), *Shichinin no samurai/The Seven Samurai* (1954), *Taiheiyo no washi/Operation Kamikaze* (1953), *Araki Mataemon: Kettô kagiya no tsuji/Vendetta of a Samurai* (1952), *Hakuchi/The Idiot* (1951), *Rashômon* (1950), *Datsugoku/Escape from Prison* (1950), *Nora inu/Stray Dog*

(1949), *Yoidore tenshi/Drunken Angel* (1948), and *Ginrei no hate/Snow Trail* (1947).

**TATSUYA NAKADAI** (December 13, 1932 [perhaps 1930], Tokyo, Japan) has 128 acting credits, among them *Inugamike no ichizoku/Murder of the Inugami Clan* (2006), *Shiroi inu to warutsu wo/The Dance with the White Dog* (2002), *Gô-hime/Basara - The Princess Goh* (1992), *Kagerô/The Heat Wave* (1991), *Return from the River Kwai* (1989), *Ran* (1985), *203 kochi/Hill 203* (1980), *Kagemusha/Kagemusha the Shadow Warrior* (1980), *Yami no karyudo/Hunter in the Dark* (1979), *Sugata Sanshiro* (1977), *Tokkan/Battle Cry* (1975), *Karei-naru ichizoku/The Family* (1974), *Zatôichi abare-himatsuri/Blind Swordsman's Fire Festival* (1970), *Nihonkai daikaisen/Battle of the Japan Sea* (1969), *Kiru/Kill!* (1968), *Tabiji* (1967), *Jôi-uchi: Hairyô tsuma shimatsu/Rebellion* (1967), *Kaidan* (1964), *Tengoku to jigoku/High and Low* (1963), *Yojimbo* (1961), *Ningen no joken II/The Human Condition II* (1959), *Ningen no joken I/The Human Condition I* (1959), *Hadaka no taiyo/Naked Sun* (1958), *Arakure/Untamed Woman* (1957), *Ôban* (1957), *Sazae-san* (1956), and *Shichinin no samurai/Seven Samurai* (1954).

**KYÔKO KAGAWA** (December 5, 1931, Ibaragi, Japan) has 73 acting credits, including *Tonan kadobeya nikai no onna* (2008), *Akai kujira to shiroi hebi/Red Whale, White Snake* (2006), *Wandâfuru raifu/After Life* (1998), *Otoko wa tsurai yo: Torajiro haru no yume/Tora-san's Dream of Spring* (1979), *Karei-naru ichizoku/The Family* (1974), *Akahige/Red Beard* (1965), *Tengoku to jigoku/High and Low* (1963), *Osaka jo monogatari/The Tale of Osaka Castle* (1961), *Mori to mizuumi no matsuri/The Outsiders* (1958), *Donzoko/The Lower Depths* (1957), *Osaka monogatari/An Osaka Story* (1957), *Chikamatsu monogatari/The Crucified Lovers* (1954), *Sanshō dayû/Sanshō the Bailiff* (1954), *Tôkyô monogatari/Tokyo Story* (1953), *Onnagokoro dare ka shiru/Who Knows a Woman's Heart?* (1951), and *Arashi no naka no hara/Man in the Storm* (1950).

**TATSUYA MIHASHI** (November 2, 1923, Tokyo, Japan—May 15, 2004, Tokyo, Japan) has 75 acting credits, among them *Casshern* (2004), *Dolls* (2002), *Wasurerarenu hitobito/Not Forgotten* (2000), *Rengo kantai/The Imperial Navy* (1981), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), *None But the Brave* (1965), *Norainu sakusen/Operation Mad Dog* (1963), *Gojuman-nin no isan/500,000* (1963), *Tengoku to jigoku/High and Low* (1963), *Taiheiyō no tsubasa/Attack Squadron!* (1963), *Chushingura - Hana no maki yuki no maki/47 Ronin* (1962), *Dangai no ketto/Kill the Killer!* (1961), *Sararîman Chûshingura/Salary Man Chushingura* (1960), *Warui yatsu hodo yoku nemuru/The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), *Hawai Middouei daikaisen: Taiheiyō no arashi/I Bombed Pearl Harbor* (1960), *Biruma no tategoto/The Burmese Harp* (1956), *Kokoro/The Heart* (1955), *Jinanbo/Second Son* (1953), *Shino machi o nogarete* (1952), *Nishijin no shimai/Sisters of Nishijin* (1952).

**ASAKAZU NAKAI** August 29, 1901, Kobe, Japan—February 28, 1988) has 84 cinematography credits. Some of them are *Ran* (1985), *Sri Lanka no ai to wakare/Love and Separation in Sri Lanka* (1976), *Dersu Uzala* (1975), *Shiosai/The Sound of the Waves* (1971), *Akahige/Red Beard* (1965), *Tengoku to jigoku/High and Low* (1963), *Kohayagawa-ke no aki/Early*

*Autumn* (1961), *Watashi wa kani ni naritai/I Want to Be a Shellfish* (1959), *Onna goroshi abura jigoku/The Prodigal Son* (1957), *Kumonosu jô/Throne of Blood* (1957), *Shichinin no samurai/Seven Samurai* (1954), *Ikiru/To Live* (1952), *Aika/Elegy* (1951), *Nora inu/Stray Dog* (1949), *Qingdao kara kita onna* (1933).

**TAKAO SAITÔ** (March 5, 1920, Kyoto, Japan) has 28 cinematography credits, among them *Niji no hashi/Rainbow Bridge* (1993), *Hachi-gatsu no kyôshikyoku/Rhapsody in August* (1991), *Dreams* (1990), *Ran* (1985), *Kagemusha* (1980), *Dodesukaden/Clickety-Clack* (1970), *Go! Go! Wakadaishô/Go! Go! Young Guy* (1967), *Akahige/Red Beard* (1965), *Dai tozoku/The Lost World of Sinbad* (1963), *Gojuman-nin no isan/500,000* (1963), *Tengoku to jigoku/High and Low* (1963), *Taiheiyō no tsubasa/Attack Squadron!* (1963), *Tsubaki Sanjûrô* (1962).

from World Film Directors Vol. I. Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1987. Entry by David Williams.

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 peulcerative 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...

*Sanshiro Sugata* (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. Ritchie 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 "short-cut" 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 *Dokkoi 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....



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 *Ikiru*, abroad, for fear of its not being understood; this although it was an immediate popular and critical success at home, was placed first on the *Kinema Jumbo* list for 1952, given the Mainichi Film Concours award for best picture and best screenplay, and awarded a Ministry of Education prize. When the film was finally shown abroad, it was very well received, and at a 1961 Kurosawa retrospective in Berlin, it was awarded the David O. Selznick Golden Laurel.

*Ikiru* (*Living*) tells the story of Watanabe, a minor official in the city administration, widowed and alienated from his married son. He learns that he is suffering from cancer and has only six months to live. ...The film is full of changes of tone and mood, as well as of narrative and visual method. It begins with an x-ray picture of Watanabe's stomach and the narrating voice tells us about his cancer....

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."...

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 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 Dostoevskian, 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 Jumbo* 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 Americanness 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 Arseniev, 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 Uzsala, 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 Prize. In 1976 Kurosawa was given by the Japanese government the highest-ranking cultural award of Order of the Sacred



Treasure, designating him a Person of Cultural Merits, the first such in his profession; and in 1978 he received an award for “Humanistic Contribution to Society in Film Production” from the European Film Academy.

Another five years went by before Kurosawa made his next film. He worked on the script for *Ran*, his Japanese *King Lear*, and on a project based on Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death.” With Masato Ide he wrote the script that was to become *Kagemusha*... In March 1986, Kurosawa visited London to be made a Fellow of the British Film Institute.

Throughout his career, from his earliest encounters with Japanese censors, it has been suggested that Kurosawa is too “Western” to be a good Japanese director. In the West a kind of purism began to prefer Ozu and Mizoguchi. But Kurosawa has always insisted on his Japanese outlook. “I am a man who likes Sotatsu, Gyokudo, and Tessai in the same way as Van Gogh, Lautrec and Rouault... I collect old Japanese lacquerware as well as antique French and Dutch glassware. In short, the western and the Japanese live side by side in my mind, naturally, without the least sense of conflict.” Akira Iwasaki agrees, pointing out that,

unlike Ozu and Naruse, “Kurosawa belongs to a more recent generation which must look to the west for help defining Japan, which verifies and analyses the one by constant reference to the other.”

...He has always believed cinema should take advantage of technical developments. Among his Japanese “teachers,” either literally or as models, Kurosawa names first

“Yama-san” (Kajiro Yamamoto), along with his great friend Sadao Yamanaka then Mizoguchi, Ozu, and Naruse. Of Western directors he speaks with the most reverence perhaps of John Ford and Jean Renoir. ...

In 1961, Kurosawa said his aim as a filmmaker was “to give people strength to live and face life; to help them live more powerfully and happily.” At the time of *Kagemusha* he said, “I think it’s impossible in this day and age to be optimistic,” but that, seeing the possibilities still in the medium of film, “I would like to be able to create hope somewhere.” ... “When I die I prefer to just drop dead on the set....”

**from Criterion DVD *High and Low*, 2008. “Between Heaven and Hell” by Geoffrey O’Brien**

Akira Kurosawa’s propensity for adapting European classics—Dostoevsky (*The Idiot*), Shakespeare (*Throne of Blood*), Gorky (*The Lower Depths*)—earned him a label, both abroad and at home, as the most “Western” of Japanese directors, even though he never saw himself as other than purely Japanese. Indeed, what could be more Japanese for a man of Kurosawa’s epoch and social class than to have been brought up on Shakespeare, Balzac, and Dostoevsky, on Beethoven and Schubert? He was born in 1910, when the Meiji era’s enthusiasm for foreign culture had not yet been overwhelmed by rising nationalist tides, the son of an ex-army officer and school administrator of distinguished samurai descent. It would be more accurate to say that for the young Kurosawa such European models had already been so thoroughly assimilated as to form part of his native culture; and far from being exotic transplantations, *Throne of Blood* and *The Lower Depths* are richly detailed explorations of

the periods and milieus of Japanese history in which Kurosawa sets them.

*High and Low* represents quite a different project: a contemporary rather than a period film, the adaptation not of a European classic but of an American thriller. Ed McBain's *King's Ransom* (1959), in the era before such thrillers enjoyed much cultural prestige. It is the only time Kurosawa ever worked explicitly with material of American origin (although *Yojimbo* bore a large debt to Dashiell Hammett, then only slightly more prestigious), and he used it not to illuminate a vanished epoch but to produce a map of contemporary Japan that ranges from the complacent and affluent "heaven" to the needy and nihilistic "hell" of the film's Japanese title, with an efficient police force patrolling the problematic zone where high and low collide. Kurosawa had treated modern themes before, to be sure. But *High and Low* is more detached in its effect: less heartrending than *Ikiru*, less savage (though no less contemptuous) in its criticism of corporate life than *The Bad Sleep Well*, less romantic in its attitude toward criminality than *Drunken Angel*. The tormented young policeman played by Toshiro Mifune in *Stray Dog* has grown up, perhaps, to be the coolly restrained detective embodied by Tatsuya Nakadai: seeing everything but keeping his judgments to himself until he really can't take it anymore.

To underscore the film's American provenance, Kurosawa gives us early on—in a close-up that intrudes with considerable shock effect into the deep widescreen vistas of the opening interior shots—the unleashed energy of a Japanese boy in a cowboy hat brandishing a toy six-shooter, the pure product of early sixties imported TV culture. Likewise, the central scene at police headquarters, in which the reports of each team are interspersed with visual clips of their investigations., conjures up the American documentary-style police procedurals of the postwar period, such as *The Naked City* and *T-Men*. The modern world in which *High and Low* takes place is unavoidably in some ways an American world—or perhaps the post-American world of a Japan still emerging from years of occupation and accustoming itself to a new era of unbridled economic development, bringing with it new kinds of social unease and dislocation.

The choice of material might seem curious. *King's Ransom*, although like most of McBain's books a good swift read, is not even one of the better novels in his "87<sup>th</sup> Precinct" series, lacking notably the raucous humor and offbeat characterizations that he usually brings to his police-station scenes. (McBain, born Salvatore Lombino, was also, as Evan Hunter, the author of *The Blackboard Jungle* and the screenplay for *The Birds*.) Kurosawa, in fact, kept little of the novel beyond its gripping premise—a businessman's son is targeted by kidnapers, but they mistakenly abduct the chauffeur's son instead—and claimed to have been impressed chiefly by the audacity of the kidnapper's demand that the businessman nonetheless pay the ransom, a sum that will wipe him out. In *King's Ransom*, the driven and arrogant shoe company

executive Douglas King refuses to pay the ransom and lucks out anyway, saving both fortune and moral reputation; in *High and Low*, after initial resistance, Kurosawa's protagonist, Kingo Gondo (incarnated by Mifune in a mode of fury just barely contained), accepts the moral imperative to save the boy and is, although not altogether destroyed, brought considerably down in the world.

From McBain's tight little paperback thriller Kurosawa fashioned one of his most expansive and symphonic works, a film that immerses itself in the minutiae of the modern metropolis—pay phones, streetcars, garbage-disposal centers—while at the same time often approaching pure visual abstraction. The single shot in which undercover cops glance at a crooked mirror to watch their suspect ascending a staircase would not be out of place in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, yet in the context of *High and Low*'s visual design it is not even obtrusive. Kurosawa—whose first training was as an artist—once remarked that at least from *Seven Samurai* on, "[I] tried to add my sensitivity as a painter to what I hoped was my increasing know-how as a filmmaker." The exceptional visual density of *High and Low* involves a double perception: every frame can be apprehended in terms both of the weightless, two-dimensional surface of a delicately composed painting and of the three-dimensional arena in which heavy bodies move and contend with reckless energy. (When Mifune's Gondo notes, near the beginning, that "shoes carry all her body weight," it only emphasizes the precise sense we always have in Kurosawa of the force displaced in each footfall.)

The director revels in the geometric play permitted by the widescreen ratio; we are positively invited to appreciate his constantly changing designs, as when Gondo opens curtains and a sliding glass door in abrupt horizontal movements analogous to the curiously old-fashioned wipes that were always Kurosawa's signature form of narrative transition. The binding agent is the editing, with which Kurosawa, working often with footage captured from multiple angles simultaneously, freely cuts in and out of different spatial planes. There is no more-conscious exercise in virtuosity in Kurosawa's oeuvre. The bullet-train sequence, in which Gondo throws briefcases filled with ransom money through a bathroom widow on the moving train while police detectives frantically film what ensues, runs less than six minutes and is rich enough in visual and rhythmic intricacies for a whole film.

These bravura technical flourishes are not a matter of gratuitous showing off. The controlled harnessing of energies that might otherwise spin out of control, the pulling together of the disparate material elements he's working with, embody Kurosawa's sense of morally purposeful action. The train sequence is immediately preceded by a scene in which the beleaguered Gondo, reminded of his origins as an ordinary shoemaker, takes out his old tool kit to assist the police in booby-trapping the briefcase with tracing devices, a gesture at once of humility and mastery. *High and Low* takes inventory of the capacities of the director's own tool kit, with such concentrated



intensity that every moment is in some sense climactic. We move in rapid cuts from one indelible visual formulation to another, each held barely long enough to take in before another replaces it.

The movements of Kurosawa's symphony correspond to different locations: Gondo's lavish apartment, with its commanding view of Yokohama, the narrow aisles of the bullet train, the sweltering police precinct, the lower depths where Gondo's mansion becomes a reflection in garbage-filled water, and finally the prison where Gondo confronts his nemesis. Within these locations (each of which has its own distinct mood and narrative focus) there are openings to further spaces: the inner lining of a shoe, exposed to demonstrate its shoddiness; the picture of Mount Fuji over the sea, drawn by the kidnapped child (which will rhyme eventually with the actual Fuji, half visible through mist); the 8 mm movie of the retrieval of the ransom; the marks left on the writing pad by a drug addict's frantic message; the illustrative fragments of urban geography interpolated in the precinct sequence; the murky hidden world of bars, drug-ridden alleyways and cheap hotels; and the point of no return—the glass barrier in which criminal and victim each find the other's face reflected.

The definition of space is not only the method but the subject of *High and Low*. Everything pivots around the spatial relationship between Gondo, in his mansion on the hill, and the kidnapper, looking up from below in his airless shack....

From samurai to shoe manufacturer: Gondo retains the combative instincts and self-conscious pride of an earlier era while struggling to reconcile himself to life as a company man. Much like Kurosawa (who had left Toho to form his own production company in 1960), fending off the perceived cheapening of Japanese cinema, Gondo touts the virtues of his own individualistic path: "I'll make my ideal shoes: comfortable, durable, yet stylish. Expensive to make maybe, but profitable in the long run."...

*High and Low* in a sense is a film with no center, or a film whose center is everywhere: it is concerned with mapping all the human contacts, no matter how tiny or apparently insignificant, that fall within its scope. Gondo may be the samurai hero of his own drama, but in the course of the film he will be seen from many angles, and often—for most of the second half—he will disappear from view altogether. He has his grand plan to seize control of National Shoes, just as the kidnapper has his grand plan to commit a perfect crime and exact an immense ransom. The film's own grand plan is to keep turning the plot around to look at it from other angles, through different eyes.

The real hero might be neither Gondo nor Inspector Tokura but the bald, blunt, bull-like Head Detective Taguchi, a working-class hero of the oldest school who can barely hold back his contempt for the weaselly executives of National Shoes when they hang Gondo out to dry; or perhaps Aoki, who suffers not only the loss of his child but the intolerable burden of having him restored at his employer's expense, placing him in the position of having received a gift he can never repay and that has destroyed the giver; or, most appropriately, the kidnapped child, Shinichi, who keeps cool enough to record precise impressions of his surroundings and of his kidnapper and who interrupts the

unobservant adults to call their attention to the film's most unexpected visual effect: the pink smoke signaling that the kidnapper is burning the booby-trapped briefcases in which he collected the ransom.

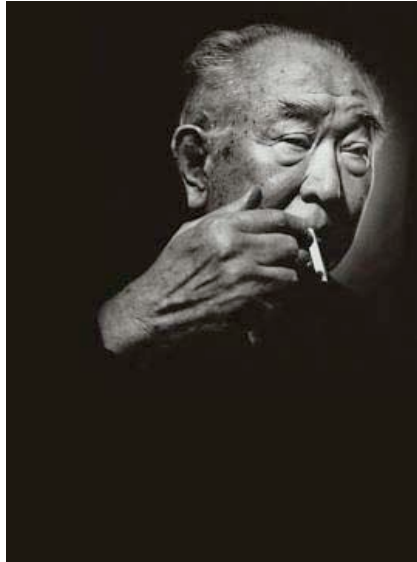
We might even want to bring to the center for a moment the discreet, sometimes almost invisible presence of Gondo's wife; it is she, after all, who tells him from the outset that "success isn't worth losing your humanity," and whose understated moral suasion directs his ultimate course of action. (Aside from two heroin addicts who both turn up dead, she is the only significant female character in the drama—not surprising, perhaps, from a director who once told Donald Richie that "women simply aren't my specialty.")

The pink smoke—the only burst of color in a black-and-white film—marks the moment when the film definitively descends from heaven to hell, the point of entry being a dump that burns "everything that can't be disinfected." This is the juncture when those above finally take notice of the life below them, even if only in the form of burned evidence. Those below, on the other hand, could always see what was above them. "From down there," as the inspector notes on his arrival in Gondo's apartment, "if he's got a telescope, the kidnapper can see this entire room." The kidnapper, then, has possessed from the beginning the same power as Kurosawa's camera: to command space and find every hiding place within Gondo's seemingly impregnable aerie. To hide from those eyes, even the police are forced to crawl on the floor.

The kidnapper, a medical intern named Ginjiro Takeuchi (Tutomu Yamazaki), wears dark glasses, the badge of the lurker who sees without being seen. He does not speak on-screen until the last scene of the movie—even then refusing to divulge his story or his real motives. The police-hunt for Takeuchi tells us little about him but much about Kurosawa's vision of the nether regions of modern Japan. The luridness of that vision—a swirl of noisy bars with multi-racial clientele and dark side streets swarming with drug addicts who resemble the incarnated lepers of Fritz Lang's fantasia *The Indian Tomb*—is now, as it was on first release, the least persuasive aspect of *High and Low*. The imagined horrors of that murky inferno simply cannot compete with the clearly delineated nastiness of the National Shoes executive team, for all the expressive beauties of the camera work that Kurosawa brings to bear.

But the structural force of his conception holds firm right through to that devastating (and much-analyzed) confrontation between Gondo and Takeuchi as the latter awaits execution. Nothing is more powerful about this scene than its refusal to provide any disclosure that would explain what we have just been through. What the kidnapper offers finally is not an explanation but a scream of pain. As the guards whisk him out of sight and a dark barrier descends in front of Gondo, the effect is like the typical brusque ending of a Noh play, as ghost or demon vanishes and the chorus intones: "And thereupon the spirit faded and was gone."

In place of some clarification of what all this might mean, then, we are left with Gondo alone, facing a blank barrier. At the beginning of the movie, caught up in the effort to grab the





company's power for himself, he was already treading a dangerously individualistic path. Now he has finally succeeded in being fully alone in a society in which lives impinge relentlessly one on another, and has thereby—whether he wanted to or not—achieved the solitariness that was the kidnapper's whole identity. The two have essentially become one—but we already knew that from the way the face of each, staring through the glass, was superimposed on the other. Takeuchi is a demon of isolation, defiantly cut loose from those indispensable ties of human contact that are measured throughout every frame of *High and Low* by a

constant play of glances and postures. Hierarchies and group identities, and he impulses that can undermine them from within, are charted so clearly that we can draw the invisible lines connecting any character with any other character. From moment to moment they cannot help but show us where they are. The space to which Kurosawa devoted such consummate skill is a space defined by human relations, and is thus necessarily a space of constant turmoil, pressure, and struggle, right up to the moment when the barrier slams shut.

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April 16 – *Tokyo Story*, 1953

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