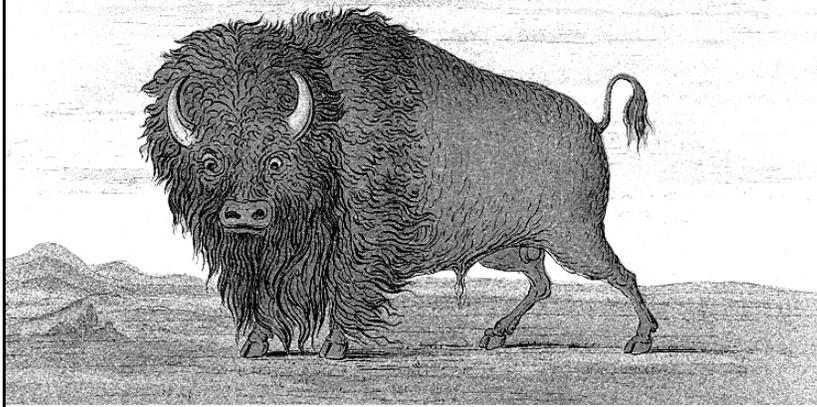


# The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films  
with Diane Christian & Bruce Jackson

**AKIRA KUROSAWA** (23 March 1910, Omori, Tokyo, Japan — 6 September 1998, Setagaya, Tokyo, stroke) wrote or cowrote nearly all 31 of the films he directed and edited several of them as well. Some of them are: *Ame Agaru/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 nudie 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.)

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE** (Stratford-upon-Avon, England, April 1564—23 April 1616). Playwright (*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Henry IV*, *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, *Richard II*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest*) and poet (*Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, and *Sonnets*) whose work has often been found suitable for adaptation by the film industry, here and abroad.



April 26, 2005 (X:14)  
**RAN** (1985) 160 minutes

Tatsuya Nakadai...Lord Hidetora  
Ichimonji  
Akira Terao...Taro Takatora Ichimonji  
Jinpachi Nezu...Jiro Masatora Ichimonji  
Daisuke Ryu...Saburo Naotora Ichimonji  
Mieko Harada...Lady Kaede  
Yoshiko Miyazaki...Lady Sué  
Hisashi Igawa...Shuri Kurogane  
Peter...Kyoami  
Masayuki Yui...Tango Hirayama  
Kazuo Kato...Kageyu Ikoma  
Norio Matsui...Shumenosuke Ogura  
Toshiya Ito...Mondo Naganuma  
Kenji Kodama...Samon Shirane  
Takashi Watanabe  
Mansai Nomura...Tsurumaru (as Takeshi Nomura)  
Takeshi Kato...Koyata Hatakeyama  
Jun Tazaki...Seiji Ayabe  
Hitoshi Ueki...Nobuhiro Fujimaki

Directed and edited by Akira Kurosawa  
Screenplay Akira Kurosawa, Hideo Oguni and Masato Ide  
Based on William Shakespeare's play *King Lear*  
Produced by Masato Hara and Serge Silberman  
Original Music by Tôru Takemitsu  
Cinematography by Asakazu Nakai, Takao Saitô and Masaharu Ueda  
Production Design by Shinobu Muraki and Yoshirô Muraki  
Costume Design by Emi Wada

What is cinema? The answer to this question is no easy matter. Long ago the Japanese novelist Shiga Naoya 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 musical elements. But cinema is, in the final analysis cinema.

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 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.

Many people choose to follow the actor's movements with a zoom lens. Although the most natural way to approach the actor with the cameras is to move it at the speed he moves, many people wait until he stops moving and then zoom in on him. I think this is very wrong. The camera should follow the actor as he moves; it should stop when he stops. If this rule is not followed, the audience will become conscious of the camera.

I think...that the current method of lighting for color film is wrong. In order to bring out the colors, the entire frame is flooded with light. I always say the lighting should be treated as it is for black-and-white film, whether the colors are strong or not, so that the shadows come out right.

I changed my thinking about musical accompaniment from the time Hayasaka Fumio began working with me as the composer of my film scores. Up until that time film music was nothing more than accompaniment – for a sad scene there was always sad music. This is the way most people use music, and it is effective. But from *Drunken Angel* onward, I have used light music for some key sad scenes, and my way of using music has differed from the norm – I don't put it in where most people do. Working with Hayasaka, I began to think in terms of the counterpoint of sound and image as opposed to the union of sound and image.

I am often asked why I don't pass on to young people what I have accomplished over the years. Actually, I would like very much to do so. Ninety-nine percent of those who worked as my assistant directors have now become directors in their own right. But I don't think any of them took the trouble to

learn the most important things.

from *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. Donald Richie, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition.  
UCal Press, Berkeley & LA, 1998

Again, there was a period of five years between films. After completing *Kagemusha*, Kurosawa returned to the script for *Ran*, on which he had been working for a decade. And, again, having completed it, he could find no money to make it. And so, once more, Kurosawa went looking for funds. It was going to be an expensive film to make (eventually it cost the equivalent of \$12 and took nearly a year to shoot), so money was difficult to find. Eventually, however, Masatoshi Hara (of Herald Ace Productions) agreed to provide part of the money and Serge Silverman (of Greenwich Film Productions) agreed to provide the rest.

The seventy-three-year-old Kurosawa, who had by this time almost lost hope of being able to make the film at all, announced himself particularly pleased because its production "would round out my life's work in film. I will put all of my remaining energy into it." When asked what his best film was, instead of answering "the next," as he usually did, Kurosawa simply said, "*Ran*."

Most of the pre-production work on the picture had been long done. As with *Kagemusha*, Kurosawa had had years to illustrate every action, coordinate every color detail. Again there were sheafs of drawings and piles of paintings for the art department to copy.

Production conditions were also much like those of *Kagemusha*. When this was remarked on, Kurosawa readily affirmed the similarity, even stating that while shooting *Kagemusha*, he had *Ran* in mind all along. However, though the earlier film may have been thought "a dry run," there were, he said, a number of differences. One that Kurosawa particularly mentioned was that if *Kagemusha* could be described as a series of events viewed by a single individual, then *Ran* would be a series of equally human events viewed from heaven. The plot of this bird's-eye view was that of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, more or less Japanized by the addition of bits of Japanese history.

The main inspiration for *Ran* was *King Lear*, and there are many similarities. Lear had three daughters, only the youngest of whom showed parental fidelity. Shakespeare has Gloucester; Kurosawa has Tsurumaru. Lear has his fool, and Hidetora has Kyoami; Cordelia dies, and so does Saburo. There are also a heath and noisy complaints about both the cold and the excessively noisy servants.

Though there are Japanese elements in the film (the incident of the three arrows, for example, is taken from a historical account), it is the Lear story that provides the narrative for the film. At the same time, however, this story—as with *Macbeth*, the basis for *The Throne of Blood*—is simplified, reduced to its single element, made into the vehicle for a single statement.

As the late critic Alan Booth has written: "The tragic force of Shakespeare's play is concentrated in the intense inward turmoil of Lear himself. It is symbolized dramatically by a storm and by an unhinged mind, and the effect of this turmoil, both on the man who experiences it on the stage and on the audience who experience it by proxy, is cathartic.

"Kurosawa's film, by contrast, is a parable of social behaviour: didactic, not cathartic. It leaves its audience, intentionally or not, with the feeling they have had a moral truth neatly illustrated for them, but have themselves experienced none of the agony which racks the empathetic witness to *Lear*."...

Indeed, Kurosawa's concerns are quite different from those of Shakespeare in this film (close though they may have come in *The Throne of Blood*), and the means through which he realizes them are

different. Empathy and catharsis are not Kurosawa's concerns. What he intends is something different.

"Kurosawa's greatness," the Shakespearean scholar Jan Kott has written, "lies in his capacity to reveal historical similarity and variance; to find a Shakespearean sense of doom in other, remote, and apparently alien historical places....The further the 'other' setting is, the less likely it is the image will match the text. It stops being an illustration and becomes its essence and its sign....And here lies Kurosawa's genius and the singularity of his Shakespeare. The theater he makes use of is, of course, classic Japanese theater."

Kurosawa's "other" is the Noh drama, and Lear is seen through its accoutrements....The costumes, for example, are, like those of the Noh, particularly and ostentatiously gorgeous. They are used as gesture—the many long-sleeved arm movements, the massive bulk, the bringing of custom into story, as when Lady Kaede rips her kimono.

There is also much use of Noh-like hats, the strings of which tie tightly under the chin and make the face resemble a mask.

Likewise the sound-track carries much that is Noh-like....The first thing we hear in the film is the Noah *fué*, that piercing, plaintive flute that we will later associate with Tsurumaru—a sound that will conclude the film as well and contribute to much of its poignancy....The acting is Noh-like in that it tends to be stately, formal, hieratic. There is, of course, much more passion (and much more overacting) than is common in the Noh, but there is, at the same time, a very Noh-like sense of presentation.

The script itself contains (rarely for a Kurosawa screenplay) many metaphors. The destruction-of-the-castle sequence is thick with them. A retainer staggers out "like someone running in a dream," the spear carriers rush "like an avalanche" Hidetora runs "like a madman," blood "runs like a river," and so on. There are also a large number of metaphorical actions. To mention but two, Hidetora loses his sword just when he loses his self (that is, becomes mad), and Jiro kicks the dead Taro's helmet aside as he is about to make love to the wife of the deceased.

Like *Ivan the Terrible*, a film it much resembles, *Ran* can be seen as one long lesson.

It is a picture with a message, and the message is supported by didactic dialogue. Here is a sample from the end of the film. The bereaved Kyoami and Tango, a lord friendly to Saburo, are talking:

Kyoami: Oh. Is there no Buddha in the world?  
Buddha, hear me. Are you so bored up in heaven  
that you enjoy watching men die down here? Is it  
amusing to hear them cry?

Tango: Enough! Do not slander the Buddha. It is he who is crying.  
Men—they are so stupid that they believe that surviving depends  
upon killing. No, not even the Buddha can save us. Don't cry  
anymore. This is as it is. Men seek sorrow, not happiness. They  
prefer suffering to peace.

Since this is the last real dialogue in the film, it may stand as Kurosawa's "message." And we recognize it. It is the "people-are-no-good text that occurs in *Rashomon* and *The Bad Sleep Well* and other films....Its [*Ran's*] didactic message is that there is no hope and that life is the tragedy that we have suspected it of being. We do not need to be freed of this truth (as, to an extent, we are in *Lear* because we are purged of emotions, having been made to experience them) because it is external and we must live with it forever. Consequently, we do not need to experience Hidetora's agony. All we need do is watch it.

We do not even need to believe in it. Indeed, we cannot. The film is too schematic for that, its elements too controlled.

*Ran* may thus be seen as a morality play—something one sees and learns from. It is also, as Kurosawa intimated, a final statement.

**from *Kurosawa Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto. Duke University Press, 2000.**

As is often the case in Kurosawa films, some of the remarks by the principal characters of *Ran* sound naive, didactic, or overstated (e.g. Tango's reproval of Kyoami at the film's close: "Do not blaspheme! It is the gods who weep. They see us killing each other over and over since time began. They can't save us from ourselves"). The rationality and professionalism of Kurogane reminds us of many other Kurosawa heroes and villains.

In *Ran*, Kurosawa creates a series of magnificent visual tableaux by transforming reality into symbols and abstract patterns. The names of the three sons, Taro, Jiro, and Saburo, mean "first son," "second son," and "third son." These names, therefore, transform the individuality of each son into his hierarchical position in the family system. In a similar vein, the film uses colors schematically. Taro, Jiro, and Saburo are respectively clothed in yellow, red, and blue, and their soldiers also carry yellow, red, and blue banners and pennants. The number of horizontal lines on the soldiers' pennants—one, two, and three—corresponds to their leaders' names and familial positions. The troops of Fujimaki, Saburo's father-in-law, are in white, and those of Ayabe, who attacks First Castle at the film's end, are in black. The scarcity of close-ups and the extensive use of long shots render even principal characters abstract figures and, by preventing the spectators' identification with them, create the sense of detachment that positions the spectators as distant observers of a drama of massive destruction. Sue, Jiro's wife, is supposedly beautiful, yet without a close-up of her face, the spectators are not allowed to judge whether there is any validity in the statement asserting her beauty.

What really stands out in *Ran* is the allure of visual imagery, and it is often not humans but sets and decor (e.g. castles and monumental gates that either coldly reject or trap Hidetora and his retinue in a hell on earth) that play major roles in the development of the narrative. However, even the impressive sets and decor are in the end images without depth....Among Kurosawa's work, *Ran* is probably the best example supporting Masumura Yasuzo's characterization of Kurosawa as a "magnificent yet tragic genius" who makes a gargantuan effort to present dynamic and perfect images on the screen."

**from *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema*. James Goodwin. Johns Hopkins U Press. Baltimore/London 1994**

Kurosawa began writing the script for *Ran* in 1976 and completed a first version around 1979. With the collaboration of Hideo Oguni and Masato Ide, the script continued to evolve over the next seven years. *Ran*, which has been translated as "chaos," conveys additional connotations of revolt, upheaval, discord, turmoil, and anarchy. Inspiration for the story came first through Kurosawa's notion to invert the legend of Motonari Mori (1497-1571), whose three sons are admired in Japan as the ideal of family loyalty.

In considering *King Lear*, Kurosawa was puzzled that Shakespeare had given his characters no past:

We are plunged directly into the agonies of their present dilemmas without knowing how they came to this point. How did Lear acquire the power that, as an old man, he

abuses with such disastrous effects? Without knowing his past, I have never really understood the ferocity of his daughters' response to Lear's feeble attempts to shed his royal power.

In the script to *Ran*, the answer to such questions is to create a past political career for the ruler and to set events in a specific era. The story is set in medieval Japan, the fictional Great Lord Hidetora Ichimonji's line of descent had to be male. To divide a realm among daughters would have contradicted history completely.

The Soviet film director Grigori Kozintsev, in a 1971 adaptation of *King Lear*, treats the play as a social tragedy and a visual epic. In an extensive discussion of the play and his film treatment, Kozintsev offers this interpretation:

*Lear* is not only the drama of a particular group of people who are linked by the plot, but also a stream of history. Whole structures of life [and] social situations are carried along and tumbled together. Not only single voices are heard in the din of tragedy (lifelike in the fullest sense of the word) but combined and mighty ensembles, whole choruses.

From Kozintsev's perspective on Russian and Soviet history, absolute dictatorship is both a cultural legacy (the tsars) and a living historical memory (Stalin). His film represents the life of a willful ruler through its reflection in the lives of his subjects. The tragic destiny of Lear expresses at the same time the destiny of a people.

In Kurosawa's perspective on the era of Japanese history in which he sets the events of *Ran*, absolute power is based on a legacy of ruthlessness. After a lifetime of brutality, Hidetora unwisely plans for peace through a scheme of shared power with the eldest son Taro established in the First Castle, the next son Jiro in Second Castle, and the youngest son Saburo in Third Castle. The Japanese meaning of these given names—"first son" (Taro), "second son" (Jiro), and "third son" (Saburo)—reiterates the hierarchical arrangement. Amidst the suffering and chaos that

results from his ill-conceived plan, Hidetora encounters the surviving victims of his own savage conquest of the realm many years earlier. This dramatic movement through the ruins left by past ambition and war is quite different in structure from the immediacy of the tragedy that follows from King Lear's demand for professions of love and from his rash temper, both of which theater audiences directly witness.

In its intertextual treatment of material found in the Shakespeare play, the film typically condenses, abbreviates, or intensifies events and character traits. Lady Kaede possesses the same savage ambition as Edmund, but she has a motive of revenge that he does not. She was born and raised at First Castle, when her father ruled from there. Kaede left to marry Taro, an alliance that led her family to trust Hidetora, who soon overtook First Castle and murdered the men of her family.

One draft of the *Ran* script includes a nightmare vision wherein Hidetora is haunted by all those he has killed....A notation in the published *Ran* script states that the idea for the sequence is drawn from the famous Noh play *Funa Benkei*, in which a samurai traveling by ship sees in the waves the ghosts of his victims.

The logic of events in *Ran* approaches the rationale for brutality and treachery asserted by Edmund: "men/ Are as the time is: to be tender-minded/ Does not become a sword" (5.3.31-33).

Kurosawa, like Shakespeare, accepts the possibility that ruthless intentions can be harbored by men and women equally.

Kurosawa considers his film more hopeful than Shakespeare's tragedy:

I believe my film to be less pessimistic than *King Lear*; in any case, it is with this sense that I made the film. In contrast to King Lear, who has no regrets, who does not contemplate his past, who needlessly falls into this terrifying drama, Hidetora reflects on his past and regrets it. In this sense I think that my work is less tragic.

*Ran* lacks the archetypal pattern of Western tragedy's sacrifice of the hero and promise of redemption for the society that survives him. A principal consequence of the film's creation of a detailed past of misdeeds by the character is to make Hidetora not only less tragic but also less heroic than Lear.

### Fall 2005 Buffalo Film Seminars

We're still checking into print availability and doing screenings of the films for the first half of our sixth year, which will begin Tuesday, August 30. We've got the list down to 20 films, though we may add others to fill gaps that become apparent as the schedule takes shape. Here are the 20 films on our present list: Fred C. Newmeyer and Sam Taylor, *Safety Last*, 1923 Harold Lloyd.....King Vidor, *The Crowd*, 1928...Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, *Black Narcissus*, 1947...Akira Kurosawa, *Stray Dog*, 1949...Robert Bresson, *Diary of a Country Priest*, 1950...Fritz Lang, *Scarlet Street*, 1945 Edward G. Robinson...Rene Clement, *Purple Noon*, 1960...Michael Powell, *Peeping Tom*, 1960...Yoshitaru Nomura, *Zero Focus*, 1961...Andrei Tarkovsky, *Andrei Rublev*, 1966...Fred Zinneman, *A Man for all Seasons*, 1966...Peter Yates, *Bullitt*, 1968...Werner Herzog, *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes/Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, 1972...Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta, *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*, 1975...Luis Buñuel, *That Obscure Object of Desire*, 1977...Yoshitaru Nomura, *The Demon*, 1978...Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1979...Agnes Varda, *Sans toit ni loi/Vagabond*, 1985...Krzysztof Kieslowski, *Three Colors:Red*, 1996...Luchino Visconti, *The Leopard*, 1963.

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