AKIRA Kurosawa (23 March 1910, Omori, Tokyo, Japan—6 September 1998, Setagaya, Tokyo) wrote or cowrote nearly all of 31 the films he directed and edited several of them as well. Some of them are: Ame 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 toriè no san alanin 1958 (remade in 1977 as Star Wars), Kemonojo (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 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 filmmeister 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.)

Rashomon (1950, 88 min.)
Directed and edited by Akira Kurosawa
based on the stories “Rashomon” and “In a Grove” by Ryunosuke Akutagawa
script by Shinobu Hashimoto and Akira Kurosawa
Produced by Minoru Jingo
Cinematography by Kazuo Miyagawa

Toshirô Mifune....Tajomaru
Machiko Kyô....Masako
Masayuki Mori....Takehiro
Takashi Shimura....Woodcutter
Minoru Chiaki...Priest
Kichijiro Ueda....Commoner
Fumiko Honma....Medium
Daisuke Katô ....Policeman

TOSHIRO MIFUNE (1 April 1920, Tsingtao, China [now Qingdao, Shandong, China]—24 December 1997, Mitaka city, Tokyo) said of his work with Kurosawa: “I am proud of nothing I have done other than with him.” Leonard Maltin writes that “Mifune is perhaps the screen’s ultimate warrior, if only because he portrayed that type in infinite variety. He has been brash and reckless in The Seven Samurai (1954), stoic and droll in Yojimbo (1961) and its sequel Sanjuro (1962), paranoid and irrational in Throne of Blood (1957), and swashbucklingly heroic in The Hidden Fortress (1958). All of the preceding films were directed by Akira Kurosawa, who is responsible for shaping Mifune’s rugged, imposing screen persona. He scored an early triumph in Kurosawa’s Rashomon (1950), playing a medieval outlaw, but he’s also portrayed a number of contemporary characters including detectives and businessmen. Mifune had originally planned a film career behind the camera as a cinematographer, but wound up before the lens in 1946’s Shin Baka Jidji. He first worked with Kurosawa in 1948’s Drunken Angel. He made one attempt at directing in 1963, Goju Man-nin no Isan which was a failure; his production company now makes films for TV. Mifune’s forceful personality, projected through baleful expressions and dynamic physical presence, won him international recognition and led to many roles in American productions, including Grand Prix (1966), Hell in the Pacific (1968, in a two-man tour de force opposite LeeMarvin), Kurosawa fan Steven Spielberg’s 1941 (1979), and the TV miniseries “Shogun” (1980).”

AKIRA Kurosawa, FROM SOMETHING LIKE AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. KNOPF, 1982

“Rashomon” actually refers to the Rajōmon gate; the name was changed in a Noh play written by Kanze Nobumitsu. “Rajō” indicates the outer precincts of the castle, so “Rashōmon means the main gate to the castle’s outer grounds. The gate for my film Rashōmon was the main gate to the outer precincts of the ancient capital-Kyōto was at that time called “Heian-Kyō.”
One day just before the shooting was to start, the three assistant directors Daiei had assigned me came to see me at the inn where I was staying. I wondered what the problem could be. It turned out that they found the script baffling and wanted me to explain it to them. “Please read it again more carefully,” I told them. “If you read it diligently, you should be able to understand it because it was written with the intention of being comprehensible.” But they wouldn’t leave. “We believe we have read it carefully, and we still don’t understand it at all; that’s why we want you to explain it to us.” For their persistence I gave them this simple explanation:

Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing. This script portrays such human beings—the kind who cannot survive without lies to make them feel they are better people than they really are. It even shows this sinful need for flattering falsehood going beyond the grave—even the character who dies cannot give up his lies when he speaks to the living through a medium. Egoism is a sin the human being carries with him from birth; it is the most difficult to redeme. This film is like a strange picture scroll that is unrolled and displayed by the ego. You say that you cannot understand this script at all, but that is because the human heart itself is impossible to understand. If you focus on the impossibility of truly understanding human psychology and read the script one more time, I think you will grasp the point of it.

When our shoot was finished at the Kōmyōji location, I went to pay my respects to the abbot. He looked at me with grave seriousness and spoke with deep feeling, “To be honest with you, at the outset we were very disturbed when you went about cutting down the temple trees as if they belonged to you. But in the end we were won over by your wholehearted enthusiasm. ‘Show the audience something good.’ This was the focus of all your energies and you forgot yourselves. Until I had the chance to watch you, I had no idea that the making of a movie was a crystallization of such effort. I was very deeply impressed.”

The abbot finished and set a folding fan before me. In commemoration of our filming, he had written on the fan three characters forming a Chinese poem: “Benefit all mankind.” I was left speechless.

Rashōmon became the gateway for my entry into the international film world, and yet as an autobiographer it is impossible for me to pass through the Rashōmon gate and on to the rest of my life. Perhaps someday I will be able to do so.

But it may just be as well to stop. I am a maker of films; films are my true medium. I think that to learn what became of me after Rashōmon the most reasonable procedure would be to look for me in the characters in the films I made after Rashōmon. Although human beings are incapable of talking about themselves with total honesty, it is much harder to avoid the truth while pretending to be other people. They often reveal much about themselves in a very straightforward way. I am certain that I did. There is nothing that says more about a creator than the work itself.

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 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 burst 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 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.

The quality of the set influences the quality of the actors’ performances.

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.


The original script of Rashomon (Rashomon, 1950), possibly the best-known Japanese film outside Japan, was written by Hashimoto Shinobu, who first became interested in the art of film script when he was hospitalized for tuberculosis. . . . Kurosawa was shown some of Hashimoto’s scripts, and one of them caught Kurosawa’s attention. It was an adaptation of Akutagawa Ryunosuke’s short story “In a Grove” (Yabu no naka,1921). The script was too short to be made into a feature-length film, and Hashimoto was asked to expand the script further. To respond to Kurosawa’s request, Hashimoto decided to add to his original script another Akutagawa story, “Rashomon” (Rashomon, 1915), consisting of three confessions by the bandit, the wife, and the husband. It was Kurosawa’s idea to create a new character. The woodcutter, as an eyewitness to the crime. The final version of the script was written by Kurosawa alone.

ZHANG YIMOU (DIRECTOR OF RED SORGHUM AND RAISE THE RED LANTERN) ON KUROSAWA (TUE, AUGUST 23-30, 1999):

I knew nothing about cinema before enrolling at the Beijing Film Academy in 1978. The Cultural Revolution had ended, and I had worked in the countryside and in a factory. I wanted to go to college–I even applied to the Xin Physical Education Institute–to change my fate.

A year later I saw my first Kurosawa film. It was Rashomon. I was immediately besotted. And a few years after that, from my humble seat in the audience, I actually watched Kurosawa receive a lifetime achievement award at Cannes. There he was, a filmmaker from the East loved and admired by people all over the world. I never met him, although I once had the chance. I was on a business trip to Tokyo when a Japanese friend suggested I meet Kurosawa on the set of Ran. I didn’t dare to go. He was, after all, a world-famous dashi (grand master). In the cinema world, I was a very small potato.

Kurosawa was born in Tokyo in 1910, the seventh child of a strict soldier-father. The boy’s early loves were oil painting and literature, including the Western writings that were so influential at Japan at the time. These interests would become vitally important throughout his career. The painter’s eye is particularly obvious in his films, especially in his sumptuous later ones, and Kurosawa adapted film plots from such disparate authors as Shakespeare (twice), Dostoyevsky and hard-boiled detective writer Ed McBain. He stumbled into the movie business as a young assistant director and scenario writer, directing his first film, Sanshiro Sugata, at the age of 33. Five years later, he made Drunken Angel, considered by critics the first true Kurosawa film. It was also, perhaps not incidentally, his first collaboration with actor Toshiro Mifune, who would work with the master 15 more times. (He was the drunken bandit in
Rashomon--one of the most charismatic performances in 20th century cinema--a farmer's son-turned-warrior in Seven Samurai and a Japanese Macbeth in Throne of Blood.) Rashomon was the film that introduced Kurosawa to the outside world, and that began an uncomfortable relationship with fame that lasted his whole career. Like Stanley Kubrick, he had the artistic strength to resist compromise, either political or commercial. But his own producer on Rashomon didn't understand the film, which gained attention at home only after receiving international accolades. Kurosawa had sporadic commercial difficulties from then on, despite such major hits in Japan as Yojimbo. His last films were produced with Hollywood support--and money--from the likes of George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola. They were bigger events in the West than in Japan, despite the kimonos and the films' medieval settings. At his death in 1998, four decades after Rashomon, Kurosawa was virtually forgotten in Japan.

The irony is that he was such a Japanese filmmaker. Aside from his superb movies about warriors, including Yojimbo and Sanjuro, Kurosawa also told poignant stories of ordinary, contemporary Japanese, some of them nobodies. High and Low, with Mifune as a rich businessman tormented by a poor kidnapper, is one. These films influenced me greatly with their realism and concern for the common people. My impression is that through our films can last forever. My own movies are innately Chinese. And for that, I will always thank Kurosawa for serving as an indelible and inspiring example.

As a cinematographer, I am awed by Kurosawa's filming of grand spectacle, particularly battle scenes. Even today I cannot figure out his method. I checked our film library and found that he used only 200 or so horses for certain battle scenes that suggest thousands. Other filmmakers have more money, more advanced techniques, more special effects. Yet no one has surpassed him. In 1989, while performing in an action film, I broke a leg and had to be grounded for three months. The director brought me 80 video tapes, including virtually all of Kurosawa's action films. We all crammed into my trailer to watch them, trying to learn how the sensei, or teacher, had achieved his effects. It was a very educational three months for me.

Just a few weeks ago, I was having a discussion with my crew on an action film we are making. We conceived a scene in which several people told their stories from different perspectives, and we realized, 'Hey, that's Rashomon.' I counsel my colleagues to resist the temptation to imitate Kurosawa blindly; it is impossible to surpass him. But such a strong and lingering impact on filmmakers is very hard to resist.

Whether Kurosawa's world is the real Japan, I don't know. It certainly seems so to me, a foreigner: a country and a people full of strength but depicted, naturally or perhaps inevitably, with a strong artiﬁcial backdrop, not just in the filmmaker's eye but in the country as a whole. Kurosawa has set the example of a cinema with a strong national flavor that attracts the interest, and the embrace, of the outside world. I tried to put that lesson to use in my maiden film Red Sorghum and in The Story of Qiu Ju. The world is getting closer and smaller. Kurosawa tells me to keep my own Chinese character and Chinese style. That is his great lesson for Asian ﬁlmmakers.

Today, many Chinese directors have gone to Hollywood. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with that. Yet Kurosawa focused his camera on his country. I shall not go to Hollywood. Just like him, I hope to persist in making films that transcend the limits of nation or country, East or West, Japanese or Chinese. Our individual emotions, our thinking and perceptions may differ and will likely become obsolete after, say, 100 years. But the unique character of our ﬁlms can last forever. My own movies are innately Chinese. And for that, I will always thank Kurosawa for serving as an indelible and inspiring example.

I shall always remember seeing Kurosawa in a documentary about his life and career. He was on location, wearing a pair of sunglasses and a small hat. I saw a man walking in front of the crew with his hands clasped behind his back. A man carrying a stool followed him. It was very funny: Kurosawa stopped. The assistant unfolded the stool for him. The director didn't sit, but kept on walking. When they saw the master coming, all the Japanese actors playing fierce warriors dismounted their horses and bowed to him. He spoke a few words; they listened attentively. Kurosawa looked like a commander, or a father, to them--as he is to my entire generation of Asian filmmakers.

The standard reference book on Kurosawa's work is Donald Ritchie, The Films of Akira Kurosawa.

**AKIRA KUROSAWA PAGE, with good links:** [http://home.earthlink.net/~ronintom/Kurosawa.htm](http://home.earthlink.net/~ronintom/Kurosawa.htm)

---

**“SCREENING THE Fifties” begins this Thursday at 7:30 at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery with FORBIDDEN PLANET, RED McLEOD WILSON’S sci-fi adaptation of SHAKESPEARE’S TEMPEST. OTHER FILMS IN THE SERIES ARE:**

- Feb 21 Elia Kazan, A Streetcar Named Desire 1951
- Feb 28 Stanley Kubrick, The Killing 1956
- March? Emile de Antonio, Point of Order 1964
- March 14, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, Singin’ in the Rain 1952

Free admission and parking. All hi-res DVD projection except Point of Order, which is available only in video. The Garden Restaurant will be open for dinner on screening nights. Call 716.270.8233 for information and reservations). For more information, go to [http://csac.buffalo.edu/50smovies.html](http://csac.buffalo.edu/50smovies.html).

**MORE GREAT KUROSAWA IN THIS VERY ROOM at 2:00 P.M. THIS COMING SUNDAY FEBRUARY 17th**

Michael Faust’s MAFAC Sunday Classics, Mifune is at it again in Kurosawa’s epic Seven Samurai. It’s one of the great ones.

---

**Email Diane engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu email Bruce bjackson@buffalo.edu**