

From James Kodwin, ed.

Respeives w Akira Kurosawa

Something Like an Autobiography: Epilogue

AKIRA KUROSAWA

THROUGH *RASHOMON* I was compelled to discover yet another unfortunate aspect of the human personality. This occurred when *Rashomon* was shown on television for the first time a few years ago. The broadcast was accompanied by an interview with the president of Daito. I couldn't believe my ears.

This man, after showing so much distaste for the project at the outset of production, after complaining that the finished film was "incomprehensible," and after demoting the company executive and the producer who had facilitated its making, was now proudly taking full and exclusive credit for its success! He boasted about how for the first time in cinema history the camera had been boldly pointed directly at the sun. Never in his entire discourse did he mention my name or the name of the cinematographer whose achievement this was, Miyagawa Kazuo.

Watching the television interview, I had the feeling I was back in *Rashomon* all over again. It was as if the pathetic self-delusions of the ego, those failings I had attempted to portray in the film, were being shown in real life. People indeed have immense difficulty in talking about themselves as they really are. I was reminded once again that the human animal suffers from the trait of instinctive self-aggrandizement.

And yet I am in no position to criticize that company president. I have come this far in writing something resembling an autobiography, but I doubt that I have managed to achieve real honesty about myself in its pages. I suspect that I have left out my uglier traits and more or less beautified the rest. In any case, I find myself incapable of continuing to put pen to paper in good faith. *Rashomon* 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 *Rashomon* gate and on to the rest of my life. Perhaps someday I will be able to do so.

But it may be just 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 *Rashomon* the most reasonable procedure would be to look for me in the characters in the films I made after *Rashomon*. 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 its creator than the work itself.

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Akira Kurosawa Talks about *Throne of Blood*

INTERVIEW WITH TADAO SATO

SATO: Why did you think of filming Shakespeare's *Macbeth*?

KUROSAWA: Well, in the age of civil wars in Japan, there are plenty of incidents like those portrayed in *Macbeth*, aren't there? They are called *gekokujo*. [Note by Sato: *Gekokujo* means that a retainer murders his lord and deprives him of his power. The age of civil wars for about 100 years starting from 1460 is named such, and during that age the trend of *gekokujo* prevailed here and there in Japan.] Therefore, the story of *Macbeth* appealed very much to me, and it was easy for me to adapt.

SATO: What did you intend to represent by *Macbeth*?

KUROSAWA: In *Macbeth*, the images of men who lived through the age of the weak falling prey to the strong are concentrated. There, human beings are described with strong intensity. In this sense, I think there is something in it which is common with all other works of mine.

SATO: Will you explain for me into what sort of Japanese speech you have changed the English speech?

KUROSAWA: In some degree, into stylized prose of the present-day Japanese. As it is difficult to understand if it is completely stylized, I preferred to adopt a median solution. Where I used some verse-style, I have referred to the speech of the Noh songs. [Note by Sato: The Noh song means the epic poem used for a script of the Noh.]

SATO: In *Throne of Blood* [or *Kumonosu-jō*, "The Castle of the Spider's Web"], the influence of the Noh is evidently seen. Did you make your adaptation with the style of the Noh in mind from the beginning?

KUROSAWA: As to the witch in the wood, I was, during the adaptation, planning to replace it with the equivalent to the hag that appears in the Noh named *Kurozuka*. The hag is a monster that at times eats a human being. The reason was that I thought if we were to search for the image which resembles the witch of the West, nothing exists in Japan other than that. The other parts, however, I went on devising on the stage of interpretation.

SATO: What sort of influence is given by the Noh play?

KUROSAWA: In general, the drama of the West makes up its character out of the psychology of men or circumstances; the Noh is different. The Noh, first of all, has the mask, and while staring at it, the starer grows to become the man whom the mask represents. The performance also has a style, and while devoting himself to it faithfully, he is possessed by something. Therefore,

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showing each of the players the photograph of the mask of the Noh that is becoming to the respective role. I told him that the mask was his own part. To Toshiro Mifune who played the part of Takekoki Washizu [Macbeth], I showed the mask named Heida. This was the mask of a warrior. In the scene in which Mifune is persuaded by his wife to kill his lord, he revealed to me just the same life-like expression as the mask did. To Isuzu Yamada who acted the role of Asaji [Lady Macbeth] I showed the mask named Shakumi. This was the mask of a beauty already not young and represented an image of a woman immediately before she got into the state of craziness. The actress who wears this mask, when she gets angry, changes her mask for the one whose eyes are golden-colored. This mask represents the state possessed by an unearthly feeling of tenacity and Lady Macbeth gets into the same state. To the warrior who was murdered by Macbeth and later comes out as an apparition, I considered the mask of the apparition of a nobleman of the name of Chujo as becoming. The witch in the wood was represented by the mask named Yamamba.

SATO: I think the Noh is an extremely motionless performance, and yet you are widely known to be fond of extremely vehement motion. Why do you like the Noh, Mr. Kurosawa?

Kurosawa: It is a general misunderstanding to think that the Noh is static and is a performance with little motion. The Noh also has terribly violent motions that resemble those of an acrobat. They are so intense that we wonder with surprise how man can move so violently. The player who is capable of such an action performs it quietly, hiding the movements. There co-exist both quietness and vehemence. Speed means how filled a certain period of time is. The Noh has speed in such a sense.

SATO: In respect to camera work, to what points did you apply yourself?

Kurosawa: The camera work was very difficult because there were plenty of full shots, and the shooting was carried out as I gave stricter directions about the poses of the characters. If the characters are in a certain position, the balance of the picture is broken, so when there are two persons, if one shoulder gets off the picture, it is all over.

SATO: I feel the influence of the traditional art of Japan upon the composition, but...

Kurosawa: As I had once been a painter, I have seen plenty of the old pictures of Japan. The way of leaving a large space white and drawing persons and things only on a part of the space is peculiar to Japanese art, isn't it? The influence of such pictures has deeply penetrated into us, and without our special consciousness it comes out spontaneously in our choice of composition.

SATO: Did you make your set conscious of the Noh? I think the very room in which Macbeth murders the king well resembles the Noh stage. Yet as it was in the age of civil wars (which is the setting for this film) that the Noh originated, everything might have become a common style of itself.

Kurosawa: That's right. In reality, the castles of those days were of such a style. When I investigated into the way of planning the castles of those days, some of them made use of a forest which was grown as if it had been a maze. Therefore, the forest was named "the wood of spiders' hair." It means the wood that catches up the invaders as if it were a spider's web. The title of "The Castle of the Spider's Web" [*Kumonosu-jo*] was chosen by me from this.

Kurosawa Directs a Cinematic *Lear*

INTERVIEW WITH PETER GRILLI

KUROSAWA: What has always troubled me about *King Lear* is that Shakespeare gives 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 *Ran* I have tried to give Lear a history. I try to make clear that his power must rest upon a lifetime of bloodthirsty savagery. Forced to confront the consequences of his misdeeds, he is driven mad. But only by confronting his evil head-on can he transcend it and begin to struggle again toward virtue.

I started out to make a film about Motonari Mori, the 16th-century warlord whose three sons are admired in Japan as paragons of filial virtue. What might their story be like, I wondered, if the sons had not been so good? It was only after I was well into writing the script about these imaginary unfilial sons of the Mori clan that the similarities to *Lear* occurred to me. Since my story is set in medieval Japan, the protagonist's children had to be men; to divide a realm among daughters would have been unthinkable....

I push. Some directors seem to "pull" performances out of actors, but I'm always pushing them, nudging them to try new or different things. We rehearse a scene or bit of action over and over again, and with each rehearsal something new jumps forward and they get better and better. Rehearsing is like making a sculpture of papier-mâché; each repetition lays on a new sheet of paper, so that in the end the performance has a shape completely different from when we started. I make actors rehearse in full costume and makeup whenever possible, and we rehearse on the set.... In costume, the work has an onstage tension that vanishes whenever we try rehearsing out of costume.

Kurosawa: An Audience with the Emperor

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN POWERS

KUROSAWA: The role of Kyoami [in *Ran*] is something quite similar to a Shakespearean fool, but there's an actual historical basis for it. Even Japanese don't know much about the culture of the period, but if you read in Japanese medieval history you find that the warlords of the period had people in their entourage of very low birth. Depending on their particular skills, they would dance, tell jokes, entertain. But their main function was to be a conversationalist. Through them, the warlord would learn about what the people he governed were really thinking. And since they were not of samurai class—you will notice that Kyoami doesn't wear a sword—they were exempted from the majority of the rules of etiquette. So Kyoami can say anything he wants....

In the time of the samurai, when the warriors were away at battle most of the time and the women were hiding out in the castle, the "fool" was something like a page who waited on them and with whom they had sexual relations. They were treated with great affection. My feeling about the relationship between Hiderora and Kyoami was that they probably had that relationship in the past when Hiderora was a younger man out on the battlefield a lot of the time. That's one of the reasons Peter was cast for that role, because he is an entertainer—a transvestite entertainer....

Many, many years ago (I can't remember exactly when), the then head of the Cinémathèque Française, Henri Langlois, took me aside and told me that I *had* to make films in color. He showed me Eisenstein's *Jean the Terrible* and said, "Look, Eisenstein was doing this many years ago and getting very good results. You must try." But I felt at the time that the technology of color films wasn't good enough for what I wanted to do, and that's why I kept making black-and-white films. But I was inspired by what Langlois said—and I *did* want to try—so I made *Dodeskaden* as a kind of color experiment, and since then everything I have done has been in color....

In the case of *Ran* and *Kagemusha*, I did paintings that elaborated the visual concept before the actual filming began. But it's very, very important to me *not* to film the movie exactly the way it's written or exactly the way I have it worked out ahead of time. It takes all the fun out of it. Because you're dealing with actors and circumstances of nature; a lot of things can change, and it's important to be able to take advantage of those things at the

moment they occur. That's what makes me happy about filmmaking: to get something different and better than what I conceived at the earlier stage.

Even in the writing stage, I think a lot of directors conceive of their characters and sort of set them out there to carry the drama like puppets. The director pushes them this way and pushes them that way, and they do what they're programmed to do. But when I conceive of the character, it's very important to have that character develop his own life. When he does, then I feel *I'm* being led around like a puppet by the character. That's where my interest in film comes from.

Notes on Filmmaking

AKIRA KUROSAWA

THERE is something that might be called cinematic beauty. It can only be expressed in a film, and it must be present in a film for that film to be a moving work. When it is very well expressed, one experiences a particularly deep emotion while watching that film. I believe it is this quality that draws people to come and see a film, and that it is the hope of attaining this quality that inspires the filmmaker to make his film in the first place. In other words, I believe that the essence of the cinema lies in cinematic beauty.

Although the continuity for a film is all worked out in advance, that sequence may not necessarily be the most interesting way to shoot the picture. Things can happen without warning that produce a startling effect. When these can be incorporated in the film without upsetting the balance, the whole becomes much more interesting. This process is similar to that of a pot being fired in a kiln. Ashes and other particles can fall onto the melted glaze during the firing and cause unpredictable but beautiful results. Similarly unplanned but interesting effects arise in the course of directing a movie, so I call them "kiln changes."

A good structure for a screenplay is that of the symphony, with its three or four movements and differing tempos. Or one can use the Noh play with its three-part structure: jo (introduction), ha (destruction), and kyu (taste). If you devote yourself fully to Noh and gain something good from this, it will emerge naturally in your films. The Noh is a truly unique art form that exists nowhere else in the world. I think the Kabuki, which imitates it, is a sterile flower. But in a screenplay, I think the symphonic structure is the easiest for people of today to understand.

I've forgotten who it was that said creation is memory. My own experiences and the various things I have read remain in my memory and become the basis upon which I create something new. I couldn't do it out of nothing. For this reason, since the time I was a young man I have always kept a notebook handy when I read a book. I write down my reactions and what particularly moves me. I have stacks and stacks of these college notebooks, and when I go off to write a script, these are what I read. Somewhere they

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always provide me with a point of breakthrough. Even for single lines of dialogue I have taken hints from these notebooks. So what I want to say is, don't read books while lying down in bed.

During the shooting of a scene the director's eye has to catch even the minutest detail. But this does not mean glaring concentratedly at the set. While the cameras are rolling, I rarely look directly at the actors, but focus my gaze somewhere else. By doing this I sense instantly when something isn't right. Watching something does not mean fixing your gaze on it, but being aware of it in a natural way. I believe this is what the medieval Noh playwright and theorist Zeami meant by "watching with a detached gaze."

I am often accused of being too exacting with sets and properties, of having things made, just for the sake of authenticity, that will never appear on camera. Even if I don't request this, my crew does it for me anyway. The first Japanese director to demand authentic sets and props was Mizoguchi Kenji, and the sets in his films are truly superb. I learned a great deal about filmmaking from him, and the making of sets is among the most important. The quality of the set influences the quality of the actors' performances. If the plan of a house and the design of the rooms are done properly, the actors can move about in them naturally. If I have to tell an actor, "Don't think about where this room is in relation to the rest of the house," that natural ease cannot be achieved. For this reason, I have the sets made exactly like the real thing. It restricts the shooting, but encourages that feeling of authenticity.

I changed my thinking about musical accompaniment from the time Hayasaka Fumio began working with me as 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 ineffective. 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.

FILM CRITICS ON KUROSAWA

