Rashomon

1950

Kurosawa had for some time wanted to make the film that eventually became *Rashomon*. A scenario was written, a budget was determined, and then (in 1948) the picture was cancelled because the small Toyoko Company, which was to have financed it, decided it was too much of a risk. Toho—Kurosawa's company off and on for a number of years—was against it. Then Daiei signed a one-year distribution and production contract with Kurosawa. He and his associates left Toho to form the short-lived Motion Picture Art Association, and one of the director's hopes was to be able to make this picture.

After making *Scandal*, Kurosawa showed Daiei the script which became *Rashomon*. "It was a bit too short . . . but all of my friends liked it very much. Daiei, however, did not understand it and kept asking: But what is it about? I made it longer, put on a beginning and an ending—and they eventually agreed to make it. Thus Daiei joined those—Shochiku for *The Idiot*, Toho for *Record of a Living Being*—who were brave enough to try something different." This is a very charitable statement. Actually Daiei was adamant in its refusal to understand. Masaichi Nagata, head of the studio and standing somewhat in relation to Japanese film as Darryl Zanuck once stood to American production, walked out on the first screening and, until the picture began winning prizes abroad, was very fond of telling the press how little he understood *his* film—his, since he, in the manner of a Goldwyn or a Zanuck, or a Wald, often signs his own name as executive producer. Toho never gave adequate foreign distribution to *Record of a Living Being* and Shochiku butchered *The Idiot*.

SOURCE

The beginnings of *Rashomon* lie in the stories of Ryunosuke Akutagawa, that brilliant and erratic stylist who died, a suicide of thirty-five, in 1927. His position in Japanese letters, though secure, has always been special—as special as that of Poe in America or Maupassant in France. He has always been extremely popular and also critically well-thought-of, almost despite his popularity. Yet he has never been considered in the "main stream" of Japanese literature. His defenders point out his inventive style; his detractors call him "Western" in his orientation. He *is* "Western" in the same way as Kurosawa: he is concerned with truths which are ordinarily outside pragmatic Japanese morality and, being concerned with them, he questions them. This he does with an involuted, elliptical style, the essence of which is irony. In translation he sounds very fin-de-siècle, a better Beardsley, a less involved Lafcadio Hearn—though there is no trace of this in Kurosawa's film.

It is based, loosely, upon two of Akutagawa's hundred-odd short stories: the title story, *Rashomon,* and *In a Grove*—which gives the film its plot, or plots. The title story has little in it that Kurosawa used, except the general description of the ruined gate, the conversation about the devastation of Kyoto during the period of civil wars and the

atmosphere of complete desolation. The story, like the film, begins in the rain. A discharged servant shelters himself under the gate, then decides to wait in the loft for the weather to clear. There he finds an old woman who is stealing hair from the corpses left there. She pleads that she only steals to make a living by making wigs from the stolen hair. The servant, who has decided to become a thief, knocks her down and takes her clothes saying that her defense has proved his own. He runs away and that is the end of the story.

In a Grove opens abruptly with the testimony of a woodcutter before the police. This is followed by various testimonies: that of a priest, a police agent, an old woman who turns out to be the mother of the girl the bandit raped, the bandit himself, the girl herself, the murdered man through a medium, and there is no conclusion: the reader is presented with seven testimonies and given no indication of how he should think about them. Akutagawa's point was the simple one that all truth is relative, with the corollary that there is thus no truth at all.

Kurosawa's most significant addition (beside that of the abandoned baby in the last scenes) is the introduction of the character of the commoner, a cynical yet inquisitive man, whose questions and disbelief act as a comment upon all the various versions of the story. The commoner talks to both priest and woodcutter—since all three are found under the gate at the beginning of the film—and in a way acts as a moral (or amoral) chorus. He is the single person in the cast of eight (the medium herself is involved because she speaks for the dead man) who is essentially uninvolved. He alone has no story, no version to tell. It is through his questions that the film evolves.

First the woodcutter tells how he went into the forest and found the woman's hat, some rope, an amulet-case, and then went to the police. There he recounts how he found the body. The priest's testimony follows directly. He tells how he saw the murdered man and his wife some time before. This is followed directly by the story of the police agent who tells how he managed to capture the bandit. His story is broken into by the bandit who tells the apparent truth of his capture and continues to give the first version of the tragedy.

He was asleep under a tree when the man and wife went past; the wind blew her veil and he saw her and decided he wanted her. He tricked the husband into following him, tied him up, went back, got the wife, raped her in front of the husband, and then turned to go when she stopped him saying that her honor demanded that they fight. In the resulting duel the bandit killed the husband and the woman ran away.

The second version is the woman's in the police court. She takes up the story after the rape, says that the bandit went away and that her own husband spurned her because she had been (presumably so easily) violated. Wild with grief she apparently kills him, then runs away and is finally found by the police.

The third version is that of the dead husband himself, speaking through the lips of a medium. He says that after the rape the bandit made overtures, wanting to take her away with him. She agrees and then insists that he kill the husband. This angers the bandit who spurns her and goes away. The man finds the woman's dagger (which has been mentioned in all earlier versions of the story) and kills himself. Much later, after he has been dead for some time, he feels someone taking the dagger away.

The fourth version is that of the woodcutter who is prevailed upon to correct his first story. He says that after the rape he found the bandit on his knees before the woman, pleading with her to go away with him. The woman says that she cannot decide, that only the men can. They are reluctant but she insists. They fight and the bandit kills the husband. She runs away and eventually the bandit also leaves. The woodcutter—whose own veracity is questioned when it transpires that *he* might have stolen the dagger, either from the ground or from the chest of the dead man—says: "I don't understand any of them—they don't make sense." To which the commoner replies: "Well, don't worry about it—it isn't as though men were reasonable."

This is more or less the point of the Akutagawa story and this is where the original stops. Kurosawa, however, goes on. Having invented the character of the commoner, having chosen to frame all of his stories within the general story of the three conversing under the ruined gate, he now invents a further incident. They hear a baby crying and the commoner finds it. He takes its clothes (a suggestion perhaps from the original *Rashomon* story), an act which horrifies the other two and which, in turn, makes him culpable. Throughout the picture he has not once acted, merely asked questions—now he acts and his act is immoral. The woodcutter picks up the naked child, saying he will take it home. The priest says that this single act has restored his faith in men and the picture concludes with the rain stopping, the sun breaking through, and the woodcutter going off with the baby.

Akutagawa is content to question all moral values, all truth. Kurosawa, obviously, is not. Neither anarchist nor misanthrope, he insists upon hope, upon the possibility of gratuitous action. Like the priest he cannot believe that men are evil—and, indeed, if Kurosawa has a spokesman in the film it is probably the priest: weak, confused, but ultimately trusting.

THE STORY

There is, however, much more to the film than this. There is an apparent mystery, an elliptical intent, which has fascinated audiences all over the world. Daiei was quite right to ask what the picture was about, though its dismissal of the picture as being a kind of mystifica-

The problem becomes one of having to reconcile the other two. The third version, that of the husband, may be hastily disposed of. He is dead. The dead do not speak—through the mouths of mediums or otherwise. That the three under the gate happen to believe in spirits does not mean that we must. Rape, murder, these are physical facts; the talking-dead are not. The poor, demented woman called upon by the magistrates, obviously terrified by her position, makes up her own version which (though she may believe it) is not, *can* not be true. (That one need not be so cavalier with both an important section of the film and Kurosawa's express intentions will be demonstrated later: there is perfectly good reason for believing in both the speaking-dead and the veracity of the husband.)

This leaves the story of the wife. Hers is more difficult to reconcile but not impossible (if you cheat a bit). Apparently, after the rape, there was a lapse of some time—recounted in the woodcutter's story as well—when the bandit was not there. During this time her husband shows her how he has come to hate her. (This point is agreed upon in all the stories—leaving out the husband's which we, for the present, have agreed is no story at all. The implication in both the woodcutter's and the bandit's version is that it was she who suggested the duel, and so some amount of hate between the spouses is necessary.) She remembers that he looked at her with the greatest scorn. She cuts his

bonds, offers him her dagger, asks him to kill her, then faints. When she revives, her husband is dead and the dagger is in his chest.

Now, if only it were not for the dagger, all the stories would more or less agree because she could just as easily have either fainted or lost her reason during a duel which followed and of which she would have known nothing. However, the dagger remains (as well as a number of other loose ends). Further, at the end of the film it transpires that the woodcutter might have taken it. He has now a very good reason for lying. Not only may he have stolen the dagger, he might also have crept up during the wife's swoon and stabbed the husband himself. Leaving aside the extreme unlikelihood of a simple woodcutter daring to stab a noble, however, what would have been the motivation for such an act? Robbery? But then a number of their belongings would be missing and the police do not mention this nor does the wife. The only missing objects are the horse and sword (which the bandit took) and the dagger (which the woodcutter might have taken). But, let us presume that this is what happened—that either the wife or the woodcutter killed the husband.

One can do this because the woodcutter now has a reason for lying (possible murder) and this makes his story (both parts of it) falsehood. Then one remembers that his version happened to jibe particularly well with that of the bandit. Where is the bandit now? His head has probably been cut off. At any rate he can tell us no more than the husband could. And who told us the bandit's story? Why the woodcutter, of course. And he lied about it, even taking care that it match and thus lend credulity to his own. If he has been the one who has told us all these stories, then they are all lies. But, in that case, why include two (husband's and wife's) that would weaken his own case? Perhaps it is because the priest tells some and the priest (though he has perhaps heard the bandit's story) does not presume to correct. Then, one solution to the *Great Rashomon Murder Mystery* would be:

1.	The discovery of the husband's body.		A lie told by the woodcutter.
2.	Man and wife seen in the forest.		The truth told by the priest.
3.	Tajomaru's capture.	Told by the police agent.	The truth told by the woodcutter or the priest.
4.	Tajomaru's version of the story.	Told by Tajomaru.	A lie told by the woodcutter.
5.	The wife's version.	Told by the wife.	The truth told by the priest.
6.	The husband's version.	Told by the husband through the medium.	Accepted as true and told by the priest.
7.	The woodcutter's version.		A lie told by the woodcutter.

There is some (not much) reason for the validity of this arrangement given in the context of the film itself. At the end of 4., the commoner is speaking to the woodcutter—as though he were responding to something which the woodcutter had told him. He says that he thinks Tajomaru probably killed the woman as well.

Priest: But this woman turned up at prison too, you know. It seems she went to seek refuge at some temple and the police found her there.

Woodcutter: (Breaking in) It's a lie. They're all lies. Tajomaru's confession, the woman's story. They're lies.

Commoner: Well, men are only men. That's why they lie. They can't tell the truth. Not even to each other.

Priest: That may be true. But it is because men are so weak. That's why they lie. That's why they must deceive themselves.

Commoner: Not another sermon. I don't mind a lie—not if it's an interesting one. What kind of story did she tell?

Priest: Well, hers was a completely different story from the bandit's. And, speaking of differences—the bandit talked about her temper. I saw nothing like that at all. I found her very pitiful. I felt a great compassion for her.

Then follows the wife's version which, in this context, seems very much as though retold by the priest who, having no reason for lying, would himself tell the truth as he heard it.

It would be convenient if, at the end of 5., the woodcutter would have again said it was a lie but he unfortunately does not. He says nothing, merely states that the next story, the husband's story, is a lie. There is here no indication as to who tells 6. because the last word before it begins belongs to the commoner. Besides, at that moment (perhaps to prepare for the supernatural to come) there is a great flash of lightning, followed by thunder. At the end of 6., the woodcutter is walking about and then stops and says that it wasn't true. If he had been telling the dead husband's story he would not have said this. It must have been the priest. He goes on to say that it wasn't a dagger that killed him anyway. It was a sword. Now, we know that the bandit stole and sold the sword, but we do actually know how the husband was killed. The woodcutter is telling us. Since he has lied about the dagger there is no reason to believe this remark about the sword. And it is here that the priest decides he doesn't want to hear any more—almost as though he can no longer countenance such lying from the woodcutter. It is now revealed that his having said he found the body was a lie and even the commoner becomes suspicious. At the end of 7.:

Commoner: And I suppose that that is supposed to be true.

Woodcutter: I don't tell lies. I saw it with my own eyes.

Commoner: That I doubt.

Woodcutter: I don't tell lies.

Commoner: Well, that is just what you'd say, isn't it?—no one tells

lies after he has *said* he is going to tell one.

Priest: It's horrible—if men do not tell the truth, do not trust one another, then the earth becomes hell indeed.

Commoner: Absolutely right. The world we live in is hell.

It might be assumed then the woodcutter is consistently lying, that the priest knows it but for some reason (fear, compassion) restrains himself. Therefore the only correct version is the woman's—which is given by the priest. Further, the woodcutter may have murdered the husband as well. The commoner says: "You say you don't lie. That's funny. You may have fooled the police but you don't fool me." Then the woodcutter attacks the commoner—perhaps not the act of an innocent man—and the two fight. Then:

Priest: (Seeing the woodcutter pick up the baby and misinterpreting his intentions). What are you doing—trying to take what little it has left?

Woodcutter: I have six children of my own. One more won't make it any more difficult.

Priest: I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that.

Woodcutter: Oh, one cannot afford not to be suspicious of people. I'm the one who is ashamed. I don't know why I did a thing like that.

A thing like what? Is he confessing, indicating his guilt to this priest who refused to expose his lies in front of the commoner? Is this a kind of covenant between the two? Then this final gesture, the saving of the baby, might be a mark of contrition. The woodcutter will save a life and make amends for the life he either himself took or else did not prevent the wife from taking. And if this is true the final dialogue in the film is double-edged and profoundly ironic.

Priest: I am grateful to you. Because . . . thanks to you, I think I will be able to keep my faith in men.

But what if it were the priest who had told Tajomaru's story? What then? Well—what then indeed? The question, like this murder-mystery aspect of the film, is really irrelevant. It is only meaningful if one thinks that the picture is about relative truth. And if that were what it is about, would not Kurosawa have made the stories a bit less reconcilable than they are? If the film is about relative truth (which on one level it is, to be sure) then it is also a partial failure because, judging merely by externals—who did what to whom—the actions are not enough at variance to make a point which one might suppose that he (like Akutagawa) was making.

One doubts very much that Kurosawa was deeply interested in objective truth in this or in any other film. This is because the *why* is always implied. And in none of his pictures is Kurosawa even slightly interested in the why of a matter. Instead, always, *how*. This offers a clue. The level of objective truth is not the truly interesting one. Much more interesting is the level of subjective truth. If the truth searched for becomes subjective, then no one lies, and the stories are wildly at variance.

Truth as it appears to others. This is one of the themes, perhaps the main one of this picture. No one—priest, woodcutter, husband, bandit, medium—lied. They all told the story the way they saw it, the way they believed it, and they all told the truth. Kurosawa therefore does not question truth. He questions reality.

Once asked why he thought that *Rashomon* had become so popular, both in Japan and abroad, he answered: "Well, you see . . . it's about this rape." Everyone laughed but the answer is not, perhaps, so cynical as it sounds. *Rashomon* is *about* an action as few pictures are *about* anything at all. We can turn the object this way and that, look at it from various angles, and it resembles a number of things but *is* only one thing, the object that it is. The film is about a rape (and a murder) but, more than this, it is about the reality of these events. Precisely, it is about what five people think this reality consists of. How a thing happens may reflect nothing about the thing itself but it must reflect something about the person involved in the happening and supplying the how.

Five people interpret an action and each interpretation is different because, in the telling and in the retelling, the people reveal not the action but themselves. This is why Kurosawa could leave the plot, insofar as there is one, dangling and unresolved. The fact that it *is* unresolved is itself one of the meanings of the film.

In all of Kurosawa's pictures there is this preoccupation with the conflict between illusion (the reactions of the five and their stories) and reality (the fact of the rape and murder). To do something is to realize that it is far different from what one had thought. To have done something and then to explain it completes the cycle because this too is (equally) different from what the thing itself was. Given a traumatic experience, one fraught with emotional connotations (murder, falling in love, bankruptcy, rape) reality escapes even more swiftly.

One can now assign various reasons for the five having seen and heard the things that they thought they saw and heard. All the stories have in common one single element—pride. Tajomaru is proud to have raped and fought and killed; the wife is proud to have (perhaps) killed; the husband (for now there is every reason to believe that the dead talk) is proud to have killed himself; and the woodcutter is proud to have seen and robbed. They are proud of these actions and we know because they insist upon them. One confesses only what one is openly or secretly proud of, which is the reason that contrition is rarely sincere. But the reasons for the pride, as Parker Tyler has indicated in his fine analysis of this film, are not those commonly encountered.

Each is proud of what he did because, as he might tell you: "It is just the sort of thing that I would do." Each thinks of his character as being fully formed, of being a *thing*, like the rape or the dagger

is a thing, and of his therefore (during an emergency such as this) being capable of only a certain number of (consistent) reactions. They are *in character* because they have defined their own character for themselves and will admit none of the surprising opportunities which must occur when one does not. They "had no choice"; circumstances "forced" their various actions; what each did "could not be helped." It is no wonder that the reported actions refuse to agree with each other. As the commoner has wisely remarked: "Men are only men . . . they can't tell the truth—not even to each other." One of the points of the picture then is not that men will not but that men *can* not tell the truth. The priest sees this: "It is because men are so weak. That's why they lie. That's why they must deceive themselves."

If one is going to agree that one is a certain kind of person one also agrees that one is engaged in self-deception, in bad faith. We know

what Kurosawa thinks about this. From *Sugata* on, his villains have been in bad faith, that is, they see themselves as a kind of person to whom only certain actions, certain alternatives are open. In the effort to create themselves they only codify; in the effort to free themselves (by making action simpler and therefore easier) they limit themselves.

It is interesting that *Rashomon* should have been an historical film—Kurosawa's second (since the Japanese tend to think of the Meiji period—the era of *Sugata Sanshiro*—as being somehow modern), because this limitation of spirit, this tacit agreement (social in its scope) that one *is* and cannot *become*, is one feudalistic precept which plagues the country to this day. This was as useful to the Kamakura Government as it proved to the administration during the last war. In *Rashomon*, as in *They Who Step on the Tiger's Tail* and *Sanjuro*, Kurosawa is presenting an indictment of feudal remains. That he sets the scene in the Heian-period is merely due to Akutagawa's having used it, and where the director follows the author in this film, he does so literally. The people, and their way of thinking, are—twelfth century or present day—completely feudal. It is as though in this film he is holding up a mirror.

In more ways than one. *Rashomon* is like a vast distorting mirror or, better, a collection of prisms that reflect and refract reality. By showing us its various interpretations (perhaps the husband really loved his wife, was lost without her and hence felt he must kill himself; perhaps she really thought to save her husband by a show of affection for the bandit, and thus played the role of faithful wife; perhaps the woodcutter knows much more, perhaps he too entered the action—mirrors within mirrors, each intention bringing forth another, until the triangle fades into the distance) he has shown first that human beings are incapable of judging reality, much less truth, and, second, that they must

continually deceive themselves if they are to remain true to the ideas of themselves that they have.

Here then, more than in any other single film, is found Kurosawa's central theme: the world is illusion, you yourself make reality, but this reality undoes you if you submit to being limited by what you have made. The important corollary—you are not, however, truly subject to this reality, you can break free from it, can live even closer to the nature you are continually creating—this occurs only in the later films.

PRODUCTION

The visual starting point remains the Akutagawa stories. The author's description of the gate and medieval Kyoto is literally followed

by both the script and camera. There is, for example, no reason at all for the bandit to be discovered by the police agent near a small bridge (seen in the film) except that this is where Akutagawa says it happened. What turned out to be an excellent cinematic device, all the testimonies being given to the audience, questions answered by unheard questions being repeated as a question and then answered by those testifying, is taken directly from the author. Likewise, in the original script, all the characters' names are retained even though, in the case of husband and wife, they never appear in the dialogue. Given the eventual difference between story and film—which is extreme and which the Japanese critics complained of when they said the director had been false to the spirit of the tales—such literal fidelity is remarkable.

The acting style, however, owes nothing at all to Akutagawa or any of his suggestions. It springs from a different source. "We were

staying in Kyoto," says Kurosawa, "waiting for the set to be finished. While we were there we ran off some sixteen mm. prints to amuse ourselves. One of them was a Martin Johnson jungle film in which there was a shot of a lion roaming around. I noticed it and told Mifune that that was just what I wanted him to be. At the same time Mori had seen a jungle picture in which a black leopard was shown. We all went to see it. When the leopard came on Machiko was so upset that she hid her face. I saw and recognized the gesture. It was just what I wanted for the young wife."

Cinematically the style is made of various parts, all of which work admirably together. Perhaps the most noticeable is a kind of rhapsodic impressionism which from time to time carries the story and creates the atmosphere. Take, for example, the much-admired walk of the woodcutter through the forest. This is pure cinema impressionism—one literally receives impressions: the passing trees overhead, the sun, the glint of sunlight on the ax. Again, during the rape scene, the camera seeks the sky, the sun, the trees, contrasting this with the two, wife and bandit. When the rape is consummated and just before we return to the prison courtyard for the conclusion of the bandit's story, the sun comes out from behind a branch, dazzling, shining directly into the lenses: a metaphor. Just as much a metaphor certainly as the scene shortly before where she drops her dagger and it falls point first to land upright, quivering in the ground; or the celebrated scene where Mifune is asleep and the two pass. He has mentioned the breeze in his testimony. Now we see it (accompanied by the cooling celesta on the sound track) as it ruffles his hair. He opens his eyes and sees it raising her veil. It is an extended metaphor, like a two-line poem. In Kurosawa's later films, this impressionism is not often seen though there is a fine example at the end of *Sanjuro* where, after all the camellias

have been sent off down the stream there is a pause and then, as the bad man falls, a single blossom falls, all by itself, and is carried away—the perfect classic metaphor for the cut-short life.

Kurosawa in this film, and more than in any other, makes use of contrasting shots. A shot of the woman is held for a certain length of time. This is matched by a shot of the bandit, held for the same time. He intercuts these, back and forth, matching the timing so delicately that one does not notice the number of repeats while watching the film—and is surprised upon reading the script to discover that there are so many.

In the same way he uses single close-ups to emphasize the triangular nature of the story. A shot of the woman is followed by a shot of the bandit is followed by a shot of the husband, and this process continues, going round and round as it were. Mostly, however, he insists upon the triangle through composition. The picture is filled with masterful

triangular compositions, often one following directly after another, the frame filled with woman, bandit, husband, but always in different compositional relationships to each other. When the Japanese critics mentioned Kurosawa's "silent-film technique" they meant his great reliance upon composition—which with this film became, and still remains, one of the strongest elements of his film style.

Kurosawa's use of cinematic punctuation is always imaginative and, as we have seen, he is one of the few directors remaining who can intelligently use that most maligned of punctuation marks: the wipe. There is a fine use of it when the woman is waiting, during the bandit's story, and it (as always with Kurosawa) gives the effect of time, usually a short period of time, having elapsed. Here, as in *Ikiru,* the wipe is masterfully used. In *The Idiot,* on the other hand, Kurosawa was so unsure (because he was filming his favorite novel, by his favorite author, and doing it mainly for a then-uncooperative company) that he uses the wipe within a single scene, not once but many times, and the time indicated as having passed can only be a matter of seconds. An experiment, it remains in *The Idiot* entirely uncontrolled and very mannered—something which cannot be said of its use in *Rashomon.*

Kurosawa does not usually use fades (either in or out) tending to be suspicious of the softening effect they produce. Certainly the ending of *The Lower Depths*—it ends on an unexpected cut—would be far less effective with a fade-out. He uses it only, as in the opening and closing of *The Throne of Blood,* when he deliberately wants the effect of distance and uninvolvement. For Kurosawa the fade usually means the elegiac.

The dissolve on the other hand usually means time passing. The end of *Rashomon* is a beautiful example of this. The three men are standing under the gate and there is a series of dissolves moving closer and closer. This is almost a rhetorical device since, in actuality, not much time could have passed. It is a formal gesture, a gesture which makes us look, and makes us feel. If the purpose is merely to indicate passage of time, however, Kurosawa has even simpler ways of doing it—one of the most imaginative in this picture is where the husband is waiting and his voice tells us that he waited a very long time. Here the effect is given through three long held shots with no dissolves or wipes at all—simply a long-shot, followed by a far-shot, followed by a medium close-up. These are used so consummately that one does not question that hours have passed.

Kurosawa's preoccupation with time (*the* preoccupation for any serious director) began with *Rashomon.* There are two kinds of time which concern him—and any other director. One is ostensible time—the time the story takes. The other is a certain kind of psychological time, the time that each sequence, and that each shot within this sequence takes. The first kind is the kind which is appreciable to the audience as well. *Rashomon* is a series of flashbacks, all of them both true and false; *Ikiru* on the other hand is a film in which flashback leads into further flashback—the scene where the father finds the baseball bat, remembers the ballgame, remembers the operation, remembers the hospital, remembers the son going off to war. The second half of *Ikiru* is a series of flash backs, in the *Citizen Kane* manner (a film which Kurosawa had not yet seen), which reconstruets the hero's life. The second kind of time is the kind of which no audience is aware—this is created in the alchemy of the cutting room, and it is telling that Kurosawa takes almost as long to cut as he does to shoot a film.

In *Rashomon* one remembers a series of seemingly actual, or at least realistic, actions. And yet the film—extraordinarily so, even for Kurosawa—is a mosaic. The average of the shorter cuts is 2 ft. (1 1/3 seconds) and, though there are several shorter cuts, and though scenes also last for minutes (the dialogue scenes under the gate), still, the average length of each shot is shorter in *Rashomon* than in any other of Kurosawa's films. This always has the effect of reality on the screen. As Naoki Noborikawa has noticed: "In *Rashomon* there is a scene where Tajomaru takes Takehiro [the husband] into the woods, then runs back and tells the woman that her husband has been bitten by a snake. The scenery through which the two together run to where he has left the husband tied up, is full of great natural beauty but the camera passes by it in one flash. I had thought that this was one shot, a swiftly moving pan. Seeing the film for the second time, however, I noticed that this was not so, and when I counted, on seeing it for the third time, I was surprised to discover that there were seven cuts in this small scene." As Kurosawa knew full well, one cuts fast and often for fast sections, slow and seldom for slow. But another reason for the extreme brevity of the *Rashomon* shots might be that the director knew he was asking his audience to look at the same material four or more times. He could not rely upon the novelty of the pictorial image to help sustain interest.

In addition, and maybe for the same reasons, he probably never moved the camera more than in *Rashomon.* The shooting script is full of directions to pan, to dolly in and out, etc. He used a favorite device of a dolly shot directly attached to a pan shot to get a continuity of action, and he was unusually careful of action continuity. This great mobility never calls attention to itself but gives the effect of continuous movement which we remember as being part of the style of the film.

All of these shots, stationary or moving, are superbly calculated as to their time on the screen and their effect there. There are few other directors who know so precisely the proper length for a given section of film. The shot of the dog carrying the human hand at the opening of *Yojimbo* is an example. One second less and we would not have known what he was carrying; one second more and the scene would have been forced, vulgar. In *Rashomon* the dagger drops into the ground and is allowed to quiver not often but just twice. All of the images are handled in this imaginative and economical manner.

Kurosawa rarely makes a mistake in his timing, and the inner or psychological timing of *Rashomon* is perfection. There are 408 separate shots in the body of the film (with 12 more for titles making a total of 420). This is more than twice the number in the usual film, and yet these shots never call attention to themselves—rather, they make it possible for us to feel this film, to be reached with immediacy, to be drawn into it, intellectually curious and emotionally aware. In a very special way, *Rashomon*—like any truly fine film—creates within its audience the very demand which it satisfies.

For a director as young as Kurosawa—he was then forty—and particularly for so young a Japanese director, the film is remarkably free from influences. Though some scenes owe much to Dovshenko's *Aerograd*, they owe nothing at all to Fritz Lang's *Siegfried* (an ostensible "influence" often mentioned) because the director has never seen it. The structure may owe something to *The Marriage Circle*, that Lubitsch film which Kurosawa—like most Japanese directors—remembers with affection and admiration, but the debt is very slight.

Of the style, Kurosawa has said only: "I like silent pictures and I always have. They are often so much more beautiful than sound pictures are. Perhaps they had to be. At any rate, I wanted to restore some of this beauty. I thought of it, I remember, in this way: one of the techniques of modern art is simplification, and that I must therefore simplify this film." Simplification is also one of the techniques of Japanese art and long has been. Those who noticed a "Japanese" look about some of the scenes (mainly their composition, aside from temple architecture, sand gardens and the like) were right though the director had perhaps reached this through his own knowledge of simplified painting techniques in the West—those of Klee and Matisse for example. Otherwise there is little "Japanese" influence. In fact the film is the complete opposite of the ordinary Japanese historical film in that it questions while they reaffirm; it is completely realistic, while they are always romantic; it is using its period as a pretext and a decoration while the ordinary period film aims at simple reconstruction. Despite foreign commentators on the subject, there is absolutely no influence at all from classical Japanese drama. Only the sword-fighting techniques owe something to the modern Japanese stage. Anyone who has ever seen Kabuki will realize the enormous difference between its acting style and that of *Rashomon*. The acting in the film is naturalistic, in the Japanese sense of the word. It is apparently unrestrained, and it is in the grand manner which the West once knew but has now almost lost. Indeed, Mifune as the bandit was so "grand" that even Japanese critics complained of overacting. There is another debt to the stage, however, though the stage is Japanese modern theater—the Shingeki. Since the budget was small the sets (there are only two—both studio sets—the gate and the prison courtyard) are deliberately stylized, deliberately simplified in the manner of modern stage scenery (again, not Kabuki scenery, which is flamboyant, detailed, and very nineteenth century to the eye). Likewise, the costumes owe much to modern stage costumes, with their simplicity, their lack of ornament. Too—the music owes much to incidental-music methods on the modern Japanese stage.

That the music owes even more to another source is so notorious some critics (Western) have admitted that the film was partially spoiled for them. This is not the fault of the composer. The late Fumio Hayasaka was one of Japan's most individual and creative composers and it was Kurosawa himself who said "write something like Ravel's *Bolêro*" —a work which in Japan had not yet become as clichéd as in the West. The composer complied and the results, as a matter of fact, do detract—particularly from the opening scenes.

Again and again in the films of Kurosawa one notices his musical tastes. Like most liberally-educated Japanese he has tended to like the chestnuts. He has already written how he once composed a thrilling scenario about cossacks while under the influence of *The Light Cavalry Overture*. Likewise one has noticed the strains of *Clair de lune* in *The Drunken Angel* and an orgy of Schubert in *One Wonderful Sunday*. This continues, though as a music-lover he has grown considerably more sophisticated and has recently spoken of his liking for Haydn, much in evidence in *Red Beard*, as is his new liking for late Brahms. Still, if one listens to the *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro* scores one finds not only the *Bolêro* again (this time on the English horn) but also that the big "Sanjuro" theme bears more than a close family resemblance to the opening melody of the Liszt *Second Hungarian Rhapsody*.

The shooting time for the film was unusually short (it was completed within a matter of weeks because most of the pre-production work had been done for some time) and is one of the few Kurosawa pictures that did not go over its budget. Daiei, though loudly announcing that it had no idea what the picture was about, nevertheless exhibited it with some care. It was given a formal premiere in what was then one of Tokyo's best theaters; the press was invited and it was given an initial run of two weeks (even now the usual run is only a single week) at all the theaters in the Daiei chain. Contrary to later legend, it was not a box office failure—it ranked fourth in 1950's Daiei listings of best money-earners. Nor did the audience seem to have trouble understanding it—though occasionally an apprehensive theater manager would hire a *benshi*, a lecturer-commentator, to talk throughout the film, giving hints as to what it was about.

Daiei, though more pleased than not with its second Kurosawa picture, made no attempt to detain him when he returned to Toho, and after the second and third runs were completed, shelved the picture. There it would probably have remained to this day had it not been for a series of fortuitous circumstances which led to its becoming the best-known Japanese film ever made.

Venice sent an invitation to Japan asking that a film be entered

in the film festival. This was before Japan became as well-acquainted with film festivals as it is now, and there was consternation as to what to send. *Rashomon* was not even considered. In the meantime, at the request of Venice, Guilliana Stramigioli, then head of Italiafilm in Japan, had viewed a number of Japanese films, had seen *Rashomon,* and had liked it. When she recommended it, however, the suggestion was met with much opposition—particularly from Daiei which had neither hope nor faith in the film. It was with the greatest reluctance that they agreed to sending the film to the 1951 Venice Festival, where it won first prize.

Its winning what was then the best-thought-of cinema prize came as a profound shock to Japan. For one thing, it had not been made for export and there remains a long-standing Japanese prejudice that things not especially constructed for foreigners will not be understood by them. For another, the Japanese critics had not liked the film. Tadashi Iijima thought the film failed because of "its insufficient plan for visualizing the style of the original stories;" Tatsuhiko Shigeno objected to the language, saying that no robber would ever use words that big. Other critics thought the script was too complicated, or that the direction was too monotonous, or that there was too much cursing. What perhaps most surprised the Japanese however, was that an historical film (and they continued to think of *Rashomon* as "historical" in the "costume-picture" sense of the word) should prove acceptable to the West. This eventually led to a rash of Western-aimed "historical" films—of which *Gate of Hell* is the only surviving example—but initially critics were at a loss to explain its winning the Venice prize and its consequent popularity in most other countries. Eventually, they decided that it was because *Rashomon* was "exotic" (in the sense that *Gate of Hell* is truly exotic—and little else) and that foreigners like exoticism. Even now it is the rare critic who will admit that *Rashomon* could have had any other appeal to the West.

Once the rare critic is found, however, he will say—as several have—that the reason the West liked it was because the reasoning in the picture was "Western," by which is meant analytic, logical, and speculative—processes which are indeed not often found in patterns of Japanese thought. Recognizing that the film questions reality yet champions hope, the critic says that this is not the Japanese way and, in a sense, he is right. Actually, of course, what had happened is that in this film (though not for the first time in Japanese cinema history) the confines of "Japanese" thought could not contain the director who thereby joined the world at large. *Rashomon* speaks to everyone, not just to the Japanese.

Kurosawa has said: "Japanese are terribly critical of Japanese films, so it is not too surprising that a foreigner should have been responsible for my film's being sent to Venice. It was the same way with Japanese woodcuts—it was the foreigners who first appreciated them. We Japanese think too little of our own things. Actually, *Rashomon* wasn't all that good, I don't think. Yet, when people have said to me that its reception was just a stroke of luck, a fluke, I have answered by saying that they only say these things because the film is, after all, Japanese, and then I wonder: Why do we all think so little of our own things? Why don't we stand up for our films? What are we so afraid of?"

Though Daiei did not retain the director, it followed the usual maxim of film companies: if you have a success, repeat it. In the following year Daiei's Keigo Kimura made *The Beauty and the Bandits* which was taken directly from *Rashomon,* and the much better *Tale of Genji* by Kimisaburo Yoshimura. Kurosawa himself, his reputation enormously enhanced by the international success of the film, went back to Toho to make *Ikiru.* Show-biz decided that Japan had made an unexampled breakthrough into the "foreign market," and the man on the street was as delighted over the Venice prize as he would have been had a Japanese athlete won an Olympics medal. Thus, in a way, the worth of *Rashomon* was partially obscured by its own success. It is only now, fifteen years later, that one realizes it is one of the few living films from Japan's cinematic past. Its frequent revivals in Japan, its frequent re-showings in other countries, its constant appearance in retrospectives, the fact that it is still talked about, still discussed, makes one finally realize that, along with *Ikiru* and *Seven Samurai,* it is a masterpiece.