

RARE CLASSICS OF JAPANESE CINEMA

A series of films rarely shown in America organized in conjunction with
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A Pot Worth One Million Ryo

丹下左膳余話 百万両の壺

Directed by Yamanaka Sadao (1935, 16mm)

監督 山中貞雄

Starring Ôkôchi Denjirô, Kiyomi, Sawamura Kunitarô, Yamamoto Reisaburô

Friday, October 1, 2004 at 7:00 PM

William L. Harkness Hall, Room 117

Tange Sazen, the one-armed, one-eyed master swordsman from the novels of Hayashi Fubô, was made famous on screen first through the early-1930s films of Itô Daisuke. Played by Ôkôchi Denjirô, Sazen was a nihilist masterless samurai in an era when social critique was often hidden in tales of the past. What was audacious about Yamanaka Sadao's version is that he took this scowling rebel (still played by the versatile Ôkôchi) and turned him into a lovably comedic bodyguard at an archery range, who can't stand up to his wife and who is easily defeated by the tears of a little boy. The story is ostensibly about a pot that is worth a fortune because it contains a map to hidden treasure. The Yagyû clan is after the pot, but it happens to fall into the hands of a boy whose father was killed by gangsters and has ended up in Sazen's care. Things grow more comedic as Genzaburô, the younger brother of the Yagyû clan, decides to use the excuse of searching for the pot to escape his wife and while away the hours in the company of the archery range's pretty attendants.

The bright rhythm and modern touch have made *A Pot Worth One Million Ryo* one of the most celebrated of Japanese comedies. Filmmakers have attempted to remake its story several times in both serious and comedic versions (the most recent version appearing this year), but without ever equaling this film. Occupation era censors cut the fight scenes from Yamanaka's film, some of which have been recently rediscovered. Our print, however, will not include these.

Yamanaka Sadao is one of the more legendary figures in Japanese cinema. A film fan in his youth, he entered the Makino studio with the help of his school friend, Makino Masahiro (son of Makino Shôzô, the "father" of Japanese cinema, and soon to be an illustrious director in his own right). He started out as a scriptwriter and assistant director, eventually working his way up to director at a number independent production companies centered on stars like Arashi Kanjûrô and Kataoka Chiezô. Yamanaka soon gained fame as a master of cinematic technique, but his range secured him a place in Japanese film history, even though only three of his films are extant. He consistently worked against prevailing ideological images of superhero samurai who could defeat all comers. In particular, his *Humanity and Paper Balloons* (Ninjô kamifusen), a samurai film without a single sword fight, proved wrong all who thought he was just a technician. This tragic tale of a masterless samurai who cannot find a position offered an emotionally devastating critique of feudal Japan, but it also turned out to be Yamanaka's last film. He was drafted into the army in 1937 and died of illness on the China front in 1938. He was only 28 years old. His loss to Japanese, if not world cinema was immense.

Ino and Mon

兄いもうと

Directed by Kimura Sotoji (1936, 35mm)

監督 木村荘十二

Starring Maruyama Sadao, Takehisa Chieko, Kosugi Yoshio, Ôkawa Heihachirô

Thursday, October 14, 2004 at 7:00 PM

Whitney Humanities Center Auditorium, 53 Wall Street

Murô Saisei's short novel has been adapted to film three times, first in 1936 by Kimura Sotoji, then in 1953 by Naruse Mikio, and finally in 1976 by Imai Tadashi. Kimura's version, made just after the novel appeared, is the most faithful to the period depicted in the novel. In the story, Mon returns to her family after working as a maid in the city, but she has become pregnant by the son of her employer. This disturbs her tight-knit family, especially her relationship with her brother Ino, who beats up the boy responsible, only to further earn Mon's wrath.

Kimura Sotoji was born into a large artistic family (he was the 12th son!). His brothers Soju and Sohachi were also famous (the first as a Naoki-Prize-winning novelist, the second as a painter), and the entire clan was involved in Shirakabaha writer Mushakôji Saneatsu's utopian "New Village" experiment. With this background, Kimura tried several artistic occupations before settling on film, where he worked in several jobs before becoming a director in the age of leftist "tendency" films. His own politics were evident in his connections with Prokino (the Proletarian Film League) and his activities in leading studio employee strikes, but that made him difficult to employ. He, like many other leftists, found refuge in the modern, sound-film oriented studio P.C.L. where he directed a variety of works, including Enoken comedies and the musical *Horoyoi jinsei* (still extant). *Ino and Mon* was considered difficult to film, but Kimura expertly brought out Murô's character psychology through a deft use of montage, camera angle, and framing. His concern for working class life is evident in the Soviet-style depiction of the workers in the first sequence. During WWII, again like other leftists, Kimura joined Man'ei (the Manchurian Film Association), but then stayed in China after the war, apparently out of guilt for Japan's actions in China. After his return to Japan in 1953, Kimura dedicated himself to making children's films.

In another twist of fate, the actor in the role of Ino, Maruyama Sadao, a brilliant performer coming out of the leftist theater movement, was killed in the atomic bomb blast at Hiroshima.

Sun Legend of the Shogunate

幕末太陽伝

Directed by Kawashima Yuzo (1957, 35mm)

川島雄三

Starring Frankie Sakai, Hidari Sachiko, Minamida Yôko, Ishihara Yûjirô

Thursday, November 4, 2004 at 7:00 PM

Whitney Humanities Center Auditorium, 53 Wall Street

Considered by many the best Japanese film comedy, *Sun Legend of the Shogunate* was voted the 5th best Japanese film of all time in a 1999 poll of 140 critics by *Kinema junpô*, Japan's leading film magazine. The story is taken from *rakugo* (a traditional form of "sit-down" comedic narration), and focuses on the craftily versatile character of Saheiji (played by the great comedian, Frankie Sakai), a man-about-town who gets stuck at a high-class brothel when he can't pay the bill. The ever-resourceful Saheiji makes the best of his situation by performing various tasks amidst the tumult of the end of the shogunate—but always by making sure to get a

“commission” for his troubles. The women of the establishment start falling for this skilled player, but as with many Kawashima heroes, Saheiji is more intent on escape—from everything, it seems. Many Nikkatsu performers, including Ishihara Yûjirô, postwar Japan’s most popular male star, appear in the film.

Kawashima Yûzô is probably Japan’s most celebrated comedy director, even though he was adept in a variety of genres. A notoriously precocious intellectual film buff at Meiji University, Kawashima entered Shôchiku’s Ôfuna studio and worked as an assistant director to such masters as Ozu Yasujirô, Kinoshita Keisuke, and Shimazu Yasujirô, before getting an early opportunity to direct during the war, when many personnel were absent. His postwar work at Shôchiku varied from slapstick comedy to tearful melodramas, and his oeuvre as a whole shows some ups and downs, but he really came to prominence after he switched to Nikkatsu in 1955 and then Tokyo Eiga in 1958. His master works range from the melodrama *Suzaki Paradise* (1956) to the romantic comedy *Room for Rent* (Kashima ari, 1959), from the experimental black comedy *Graceful Brute* (Shitoyakana kedamono, 1962) to *Temptation on Glamour Island* (Gurama-tô no yûwaku, 1959), one of the most bizarre parodies of wartime and postwar Japan. As is probably evident from the repeated appearance of toilets in his stylish films, Kawashima’s world-view was dandyish but despairingly cynical, summed up in part by one of his favorite expressions, “Life is embarrassing.”

Kawashima walked with a limp and was troubled by a weak heart, dying in 1963 at the young age of 45. His life and films have been commemorated by at least two of his students, the director Imamura Shôhei, who was assistant director and co-writer for *Sun Legend of the Shogunate*, and the prize-winning novelist Fujimoto Giichi, who co-authored *Room for Rent*. Both have written books on the man who inspired them.

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