

KON ICHIKAWA

Now in his fifties, Kon Ichikawa joined a Japanese animation studio at the age of eighteen. In 1946, he completed his first feature, DOJOJI MUSUME, a puppet film. The film was seized by the Occupation authorities, who were looking for "feudal remnants" and the negative has since been lost. After this, Ichikawa joined Toho Production Company and began to make, in his words, "another kind of cartoon," a series of satirical comedies, of which POO-SAN (based on an actual Japanese comic strip) is considered the best. Donald Richie has written that "until his fortieth year Ichikawa was something like a miniature Preston Sturges, a small-time Billy Wilder, not nearly so good as either but funny enough at times." In this series, A BILLIONAIRE (1954) seems a fine example of this period of Ichikawa's work, lightly satirizing petty corruption in a manner that suggests Wilder's recent THE FORTUNE COOKIE. The other thread that runs through the film, however -- the obsession with the bomb -- seems a little too black for Wilder or Sturges.

With the BURMESE HARP (1956), the darker side of Ichikawa came to the fore. The director has said, "I had become aware that men are unhappy. You can even say that they are in anguish and so the only way to show a real man is to show an unhappy one. Oh, I look around for some kind of humanism but I never seem to find it. People are always complaining. . . why show all that strain and pain, they say. And they want happy endings, too. But doesn't this desire for a happy ending show how unhappy they really are?" This awareness of the anguish of humanity has been the theme of Ichikawa's best known films. It can at times lead to a lack of dramatic logic (as has been said of FIRES ON THE PLAINS) or to outright moralizing (skirted in the BURMESE HARP but rather embarrassingly obvious towards the end of THE OUTCAST). But his painful empathy with his suffering characters never allows him to create oversimplified mouth-pieces for his theme; rather, his character are complex, often contradictory, always human.

Ichikawa divides his films into two groups. There are the "light" ones (what the director calls his Walt Disney side: ". . .there is a lot of Disney in me -- it's just that my subjects are different.") and the dark films. (In the present series, according to Ichikawa, POO-SAN, HER BROTHER, THE REVENGE OF YUKI-NO-JO, ALONE ON THE PACIFIC, and TOKYO OLYMPIAD belong to the "light" films while THE BURMESE HARP, THE HEART, PUNISHMENT ROOM, CONELAGRATION, FIRES ON THE PLAIN, ODD OBSESSION, and THE OUTCAST are "dark.") But as Donald Richie has noted the two sides often overlap. "The comic fate of the entire cast of ODD OBSESSION -- this is laughable but it is none the less serious, YUKI-NO-JO is a film which might be compared to a CAPTAIN JANUARY directed by Luis Bunuel."

Ichikawa usually works with the same script-writer, his wife Nato Wada. Once the script is finished, the director spends several weeks "visualizing" the film -- drawing pictures, determining camera angles and shot lengths, planning camera movements, etc. The result of this visualization is what has come to be known as "the Ichikawa look", which as Richie has noted, "owes much less to traditional art than it does to modern graphic design. The angular pattern is usually bold, the balance is almost asymmetrical, the framing is precise. . . Here the 'cartoon influence is seen strongly, not specifically Disney but those animated cartoons which were designed by graphic artists." The Ichikawa "look" is ideally suited to the dimensions of the cinemascope screen, and Ichikawa's use of it in THE OUTCAST,

CONFLAGRATION, and YUKI-NO-JO is masterful. He is also extremely skilful in his use of the flashback, a technique which he seems to favor and which appears in many of his films.

Ichikawa refuses to be pinned down as to any personal view point or unifying theme: "People are always suprised at my humor and then they are always suprised at the bleakness of whatever philosophy I have. To me they seem perfectly complementary. . .Somebody called the Olympic picture a 'hymn to life' and I guess that is what I am about. . .I can't define it any better than I have in my films. After all, a director only has his films to speak with. If he doesn't get through then he hasn't made the film very well or it hasn't been looked at very well."