



[Vimeo link for ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS](#)

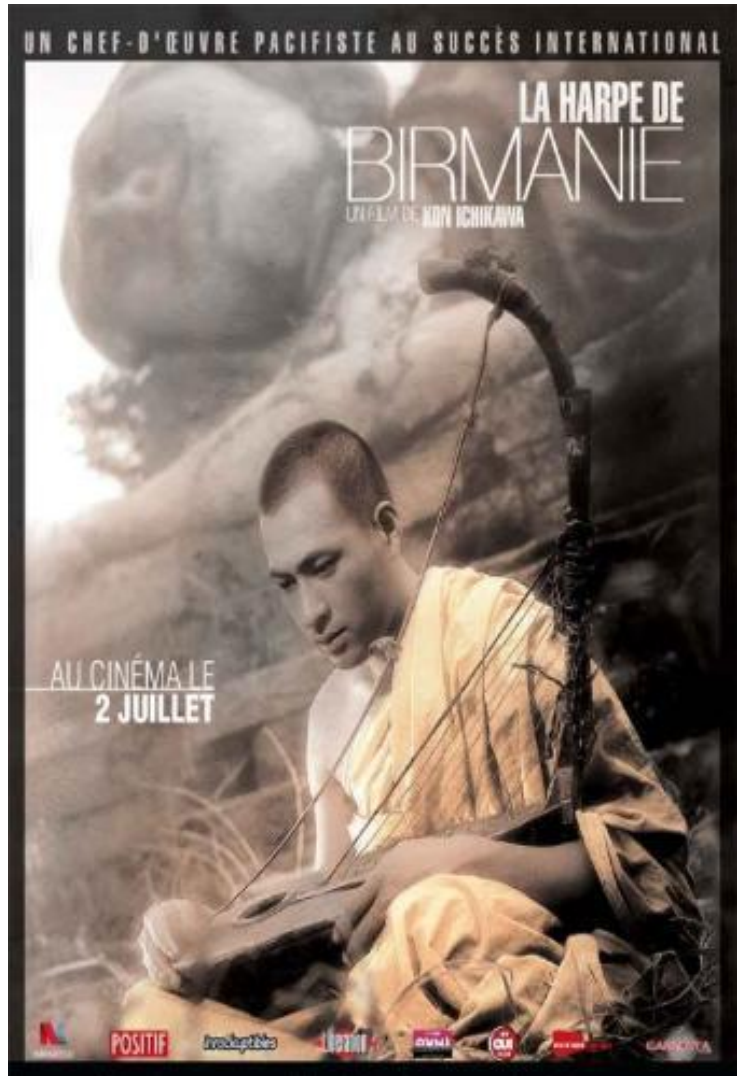
[Vimeo link for our introduction to The Burmese Harp](#)

[Zoom link for all FALL 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions](#)

**Directed by** Kon Ichikawa  
**Based on the novel by** Michio Takeyama  
**Screenplay by** Natto Wada  
**Produced by** Masayuki Takaki  
**Original Music by** Akira Ifukube  
**Cinematography by** Minoru Yokoyama  
**Film Editing by** Masanori Tsujii

Rentarô Mikuni...Captain Inouye  
Shôji Yasui...Mizushima  
Jun Hamamura...Ito  
Taketoshi Naitô...Kobayashi  
Shunji Kasuga...Maki  
Kô Nishimura...Baba ;  
Keishichi Nakahara...Takagi  
Toshiaki Ito...Hashimoto  
Hiroshi Tsuchikata...Okada  
Tomio Aoki...Oyama  
Nobuteru Hanamura...Nakamura

**Kon Ichikawa** (20 November 1915, Mie, Japan—13 February 2008, Tokyo, Japan, pneumonia) directed 89 films, the last of which was *Inugamike no ichizoku/The nugami Clan* (2006). Some of the others were *Kah-chan/Bib Mama* (2001), *Yatsuhakamura/The 8-Tomb Village* (1996), *Shijushichinin no shikaku/47 Ronin* (1994), *Taketori*



*monogatari/Princess from the Moon* (1987), *Biruma no tategoto/The Burmese Harp* (1985), *Joôbachi/Queen Bee* (1978), *Kyoto* (1969), *Genji monogatari/Tale of Genji* (1966), *Tôkyô orimpikku/Tokyo Olympiad* (1965), *Yukinojo henge/An Actor's Revenge* (1963), *Nobi/Fires on the Plain* (1959), *Biruma no tategoto/The Burmese Harp* (1956), *Aoiro kakumei/The Blue Revolution* (1953), *Ashi ni sawatta onna/The Woman Who Touched the Legs* (1952), *Akatsuki no tsuiseki/Police and Small Gangsters* (1950), *Toho senichi-ya/A Thousand and One Nights with Toho* (1947), and *Kachikachi yama* (1934).

**RENTARÔ MIKUNI** (20 January 1923, Gunma, Japan—14 April 2013 (age 90) in Inagi, Tokyo, Japan) appeared in over 170 films, the earliest of which was *Zemma/The Good Fairy* (1951). Some of the others were *Tsuribaka nishshi 20/Free and Easy 20* (2009; he was also in 19 other *Free and Easy* films), *Onna zakari/A Mature Woman* (1994), *Musuko/My*

*Sons* (1991), *Arashi ga oka/Wuthering Heights* (1988), *Hotaru-gawa/River of Fireflies* (1987), *Yasei no shômei/Never Give Up* (1978), *Shinken shobu/Death Match* (1971), *Yajû toshi/City of Beasts* (1970), *Kaidan/Ghost Stories* (1964), *Seppuku/Harakiri* (1962), *Yoku/Avarice* (1958), *Biruma no tategoto/The Burmese Harp* (1956), *Aijin/The Lovers* (1953), and *Tsuma/Wife* (1953).

**SHÔJI YASUI** (16 August 1928—3 March 2014 (age 85) in Chiba, Japan) appeared in only 11 films: *Yume no onna/Yearning* (1993), *Ako-Jo danzetsu/Swords of Vengeance/Fall of Ako Castle* (1978), *Kiro to kage* (1961), *Rokudenashi/Good-for-Nothing* (1960), *Ningen no jôken/Human Condition II: Road to Eternity* (1959), *Zesshō* (1958), *Dose hirotta koi da mono* (1958), *Sabita naifu/Tusy Knife* (1958), *Biruma no tategoto/The Burmese Harp* (1956), *Tsuki wa noborinu/The Moon Has Risen* (1955), and *Kokoro/The Heart* (1955).

**Jun Hamamura** (7 February 1906, Fukuoka, Japan—21 June 1995, Setagaya, Tokyo) appeared in 123 films, the last of which was *Nemuru otoko/Sleeping Man* (1996). Some of the others were *Kappa/Water Creature* (1994), *Maihime/The Dancer* (1989), *Taketori monogatari/Princess from the Moon* (1987), *Makai tenshō/Samurai Reincarnation* (1981), *Nosutoradamusu no daiyogen/The Last Days of Planet Earth* (1974), *Kaidan* (1964), *Kuroi junin no onna/Ten Dark Women* (1961), *Seishun zankoku monogatari/A Story of the Cruelties of Youth* (1960), *Ningen no jôken/Human Condition II: Road to Eternity* (1959), *Nobi/Fires on the Plain* (1959), *Biruma no tategoto/The Burmese Harp* (1956), *Okami/Wolf* (1955), and *Makiba monogatari* (1938).

**TAKETOSHI NAITÔ** (16 June 1926, Fukuoka, Japan—21 August 2012 (age 86) in Yokohama, Kanagawa, Japan) appeared in 72 films, the last of which was *Shiberia Chôtokkyû 3/Siberian Express 3* (2003). Some of the others were: *Wandâfuru raifu/After Life* (1998), *Kamikaze takushî/Kamikaze Taxi* (1995), *Sen no Rikyu/Death of a Tea Master* (1989), *Gojira/Godzilla 1985* (1984), *Sâdo* (1978), *Yoba/The Possessed* (1976), *Kaidan Yuki Joro/The Snow Woman* (1968), *Ningen no jôken/Human Condition III: A Soldier's Prayer* (1961), *Ningen no jôken/Human Condition II: Road to Eternity* (1959), *Mahiru no ankoku/Darkness at Noon* (1956), *Biruma no tategoto/The Burmese Harp* (1956), *Tomoshiibi* (1954) and *Onna hitori daichi o yuku* (1953).



**from *World Film Directors, Vol. II*. Ed. John Wakeman. The H. W. Wilson Co., NY, 1988.**

Kon Ichikawa, Japanese director and scenarist, was born at Uji Yamada, Mie Prefecture. His health was poor as a child, and he devoted much of his leisure to drawing and painting, envisaging a career as an artist. His other obsession was the cinema, and when he saw his first Disney cartoons he realized that he could combine the two—"Seeing Mickey Mouse and Sill Symphony," he says, "I realized that pictures and film were deeply organically related. All right, I decided, I'm going to make animated films too."

In 1933 Ichikawa graduated from Ichioka Commercial School in Osaka and joined the J.O. Film Studios in Kyoto, which had its own small animation department. Before long, he was the animation department, scripting cartoons, supervising the painting and photography, and editing the results singlehanded. In due course, J.O. established a feature department, where Ichikawa worked as an assistant under four directors of whom the best known was Yutaka Abe. In the late 1930s the company merged with another called P.L.C. to form the Toho film company, with studios in Tokyo.

Ichikawa made his first film for Toho at the end of the Pacific War—an adaptation of a Kabuki play called *Musume Dojoji* (*A Girl at the Dojo Temple*, 1946), about a dancer who sacrificed herself so that her beloved son can cast a new temple bell. Originally planned as an animated film, it was made with puppets instead because of the wartime labor shortage. It was completed just after the war but was confiscated by the American occupation authorities,

who were at first uneasy about anything drawing on Japanese traditions. The film was subsequently lost.

In 1947, some of Toho's employees broke away to form a new company, Shin Toho, which celebrated its birth with a portmanteau film to which Ichikawa contributed some footage. His first surviving solo work, however, was *Hana hiraku* (*A Flower Blooms*, 1948), starring Ken Uehara and Hideko Takamine in a melodramatic story about a rich girl who becomes infatuated with a militant student but realizes her mistake when he makes another student pregnant. The movie was based on a novel by Yaeko Nogami, and its cinematic possibilities were pointed out to Ichikawa by Natto Wada, a freelance scenarist who later became his wife. She joined Shin Toho in 1949 and for many years, there and elsewhere, was Ichikawa's closest collaborator.

Most of Ichikawa's early films were literary adaptations assigned by his employers. He has explained how he and his wife would "live with" a project over a period of months, reading the assigned text and discussing together the most promising cinematic approach, the characters and settings. Natto Wada would then incorporate all these ideas into her script. Ichikawa says his wife "is very meticulous, so she always did a complete and beautifully detailed scenario."

Working in this way, he poured out a stream of about a dozen melodramas and action films for Shin Toho in 1948-1951 and then, rejoining Toho, began to specialize in romantic comedies and satires. The first of his pictures to attract much attention was *Pu-san* (*Mr. Pu*, 1953), inspired by Taizo Yoyama's famous comic strip. Yunosuke Ito plays a good-hearted schoolteacher at a Tokyo cram school, an aging Candide in the grasping materialistic world of postwar Japan. Innocently involved in a political demonstration, he loses his job and winds up on the assembly line at an arms factory, while Colonel Gotsu, a former war criminal who is now a corrupt politician, makes a fortune by selling his memoirs.

This is an extremely funny but deeply nihilistic satire. Apart from the hero and a devoted nurse who looks after him when he is run down by a truck, it has no sympathetic characters. Members of the Diet, communists, students, and everyone else are

shown to be rude, greedy, hypocritical, and ruthless—totally corrupted by the traumas of the war and the occupation. Everywhere there are signs of rearmament and militarization; war criminals are back in power; gangsters run even the educational system. In this ugly new Japan, there is no time or room for good manners and the old values; decency and humility are weaknesses, and the weak go to the wall.

Other satires followed in 1953-1954, including notably *Aoiro kakumei* (*The Blue Revolution*, 1953), about a rather Pu-like academic, and *Okuman choja* (*A Billionaire*, 1954). The latter centers on another Candide-like figure—a tyro tax inspector of



disastrous honesty. Sent to investigate a case of tax evasion, he discovers that the offenders live half-starved in a hovel with eighteen children and an insane non-paying boarder who is building an atomic bomb in her room. The hero eventually accepts a small bribe, but then is so guilt-ridden that he confesses and attempts suicide, in the process accidentally exposing a politician's huge tax fraud.

Films like this, showing that there is one law for the poor and none for the rich, established Ichikawa as a "spokesman for the postwar frustration felt by the little man." But at the same

time he was turning out light comedies and an occasional melodrama, and he acknowledges that his work has no unifying theme: "I just make any picture I like or any that the company tells me to do." Politically engaged critics sometimes dismiss him on this account as no more than a talented hack—the director Nagisa Oshima maintains that "he's just an illustrator." Ichikawa, an immensely modest man, is in fact quite happy to accept this view of his work, and indeed, as Audie Bok points out, "It was with the intention to illustrate that he began his filmmaking career."

Most, however, have a much higher opinion of Ichikawa's achievement, and—since critics are generally more at ease with "serious" films than comedies—this view gathered strength with the darker movies he began to make in 1955, when he left Toho and joined Nikkatsu. The first of these was *Kokoro* (*The Heart*, 1955), based on a novel by Soseke Natsume about a man who, as a young student, had driven his best friend to suicide by stealing his girlfriend, but whose marriage to this woman is so blighted by guilt that at last, in middle age, he takes his own life also.



*Kokoro* was said to be “conceived like a quartet,” and was much praised for its “beautiful monochrome shadowy interiors and stark landscapes.” But Ichikawa’s sense of irony—a rare quality in a Japanese director—is irrepressible, and even in this bleak film there are humorous touches, like the lethargic messenger who delivers a tragic telegram half asleep, and the proud mother who keeps making ineffectual efforts to display her son’s university diploma.

And in 1956 came Ichikawa’s first major success, *Biruma no tategoto* (*The Burmese Harp*), very sensitively adapted by Natto Wada from the novel by Michio Takeyama. It has Shoji Yasui as Mizushima, a young Japanese soldier-musician in Burma at the end of the Second World War. The remains of his unit are prisoners of the British, but some of their comrades are still fighting in the mountains, and Mizushima, appalled by the waste, volunteers to seek them out and persuade them to surrender. Invoking their promise to die for the Emperor, they refuse and are wiped out.



Mizushima himself is almost killed but is rescued and healed by a Buddhist monk. Intent on rejoining his unit for repatriation, he steals the monk’s robe, and, thus disguised, sets off. But on the way back he finds himself increasingly possessed by the role he has assumed, and disturbed by the numberless corpses of his comrades that lie unburied and unmourned on foreign soil—the ultimate horror for a Japanese soldier. By the time he gets back to his imprisoned unit, he has decided to refuse repatriation and to stay behind in Burma to bury the dead and to pray for their souls.

As Joan Mellen says, “Mizushima has decided to sacrifice loyalty to a single group for devotion to a larger entity,” and “his decision becomes an affirmation of what it means to be Japanese. Mizushima will unite himself with the family of ancestors comprised by these dead.” And in fact Ichikawa goes beyond this transcendent notion of nationalism to celebrate the greater community of mankind. Burmese and English are spoken in the film as well as Japanese, and there is a powerfully affecting scene when, the fighting at an end, the Japanese greet the enemy with a rendering of

“There’s No Place Like Home”—a song beloved of soldiers almost everywhere—and the British troops sing the song back in English out of the darkness.

Joan Mellen has very mixed feelings about this picture, In *The Waves at Genji’s Door* she compares it unfavorably with Kobayashi’s antiwar films, saying that it whitewashes the Japanese troops and reveals Ichikawa’s “lack of consistent point of view or personal commitment.” But she allows that he had resisted the temptation to caricature the British and goes on: “The deepest beauty of...[*The Burmese Harp*] derives from the character of Mizushima, who scarcely utters a word throughout....in his magnificent last confrontation with the troop,

Mizushima faces his former comrades from behind the barbed wire of their camp on the night before their departure. At first they cheer wildly, believing that he has returned and will go home with them after all. On his Burmese harp he plays, tenderly and gently, ‘There’s No Place Like Home.’ Without words he affirms that he has not ceased to love either them or Japan....Then

he is gone. This may be the most moving scene in the history of the Japanese film.” John Simon was equally impressed by Ichikawa’s delicate apprehension of “the intimate role a musical instrument can play in the psychic development of a man.”

*The Burmese Harp* came fifth in *Kinema Jumbo*’s annual poll of Japan’s “Ten Best Films” and won the San Giorgio Prize at Venice for what it says about “men’s capacity to live with one another.” Ichikawa then returned to the Daiei production company, for whom he had directed one film in 1952, to make a variety of comedies, satires, and thrillers, including the controversial sex-and-violence drama *Shokei no heya* (*Punishment Room*, 1956), based on Shintaro Ishihara’s novel about the privileged, aimless teenagers who haunt Japan’s beaches during the summer. *Manin densha* (*A Full-Up Train*, 1957) deals by contrast with a good boy—a bright-eyed college graduate who is reduced to a nervous wreck by the demands of the high-pressure job he must take to support his old-fashioned family. Behind the bitter, exaggerated jokes, Audie Bock observed, “are the growing pains of postwar Japan.”

In the same year, Ichikawa also directed the

interesting and quite different *Tohoku no zummutachi* (*The Men of Tohoku*, 1957), his only work for Tohu during this period. The film, based on a story by Fukuzawa, is set in the northern mountains in a strange community where only the eldest sons can marry, the younger being condemned to servitude and celibacy. The hero, thus deprived, is further handicapped by stinking breath. In the end, he sets out for a legendary land beyond the mountains where there are only women, and a magic mushroom grows that cures halitosis. ...Ichikawa wrote the script himself, for the first time using the pseudonym “Christie.” (He is addicted to foreign thrillers, and his pen name is a tribute to Agatha Christie, who in his opinion should have won the Nobel Prize.)

Ichikawa’s next major film was *Enjo*

(*Conflagration*, 1958), adapted from Yukio Mishima’s novel *Kinkakuji*, itself based on an actual event. Set in postwar Japan, it centers on Mizoguchi (Raiko Ichikawa), a young man whose mother’s open promiscuity has induced in him a sense of inferiority and disgrace that expresses itself in his acute stammer. Mizoguchi becomes a Buddhist acolyte at the exquisite Temple of the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto, a symbol for him of all that is pure and perfect—both an inspiration and a reproach. But even there, he finds, corruption and hypocrisy are rampant, and finally, in a desperate act of purgation, he burns the temple down. The story is told in flashback as Mizoguchi is interrogated by the police, and the film ends with his suicide—he jumps from a train on the way to jail for arson.

“The visuals of the film are superb,” wrote Donald Ritchie. “Ichikawa and [his cameraman] Kazuo Miyagawa...used the wide-screen in an intelligent and creative manner, and the textures captured in black and white were—even for Japan—beyond comparison. Particularly impressive was the use of architecture....Other elements in the catastrophe are introduced with equal force and in purely visual terms, as when Ichikawa cuts from one time frame to another to adumbrate the connections in Mizoguchi’s anguished psyche between the Temple, his despised mother, and the corrupting presence in Kyoto of the victorious American forces. This remains Ichikawa’s own favorite among his films.

*Kagi* (*Odd Obsession*, 1959), very loosely

based on a novel by Junichiro Tanizaki, is an ironic, claustrophobic, and intensely beautiful study of erotic obsession...This was followed by an antiwar film even more successful than *The Burmese Harp*, one that placed second in the *Kinema Jumbo* poll. *Nobi* (*Fires on the Plain*, 1959) is based on the novel by Shohei Ooka, with a spare script by Natto Wada that relies more on images than on dialogue. It deals with the plight of the Japanese forces on the Leyte-Philippine front in 1945. There is no food, and the wounded are turned away from field hospitals unless they can supply their own rations. The Americans are presented as ruthless killers who murder prisoners for pleasure, and native guerrillas hunt down those who escape capture on the barren plain.

The film’s hero is Private Tamura (Eiji

Funakoshi), a decent man who is driven to eating leeches and soiled earth, but is horrified enough to kill when he discovers that his comrades, half insane with hunger, are eating human flesh. Tamura finds that, even in his extremity, he would rather die than surrender his humanity in his way, and walks unarmed into an enemy attack that he cannot survive. Joan Mellen calls this a “fiercely expressionistic”



film “unrelenting in its criticism of the Japanese army,” and goes on: “Throughout the film Ichikawa unrelentingly imposes images exposing the grotesque barbarism of war...[but] maintains a distance that refuses to permit his film any easy *voyeurism* or enjoyment of horror for its own sake....In a film daring in its depiction of cannibalism, he argues that the real horror is...the atrocity of war itself.”

...Time and again Miyagawa’s superlative photography redeems the most sordid objects and actions, seeming to insist that there is beauty everywhere.”

...The director’s ability to make bricks without straw has never been better demonstrated than in *Yukinojo henge* (*An Actor’s Revenge*, 1963), the third screen version of a well-known tearjerker by Otokichi Mikami. ...As Donald Ritchie puts it, giving Ichikawa such an assignment was “like asking Buñuel to remake *Stella Dallas*,” but the result was “one of the most visually entertaining films ever to come from Japan.”...

For *Tokyo Orimpikku* (*Tokyo Olympiad*, 1965), Ichikawa’s documentary about the 1964

Games, he had a production team of 556 and used over a hundred cameras. Some seventy hours of film was shot, and eventually edited down to about 165 minutes. *Tokyo Olympiad* might almost be a direct rejoinder to Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938), with its flags and torches and godlike athletes. "Time and again," Donald Richie writes, "Ichikawa's camera turns away from the major events to capture details of the spectators, to watch the athletes at rest, to celebrate those who came in not first, but third, or last."...Having expected television-style coverage emphasizing scores and records, the Olympic Organizing Board was apparently dismayed by Ichikawa's humanist document. Foreign versions of the film were cut by anything up to fifty percent, but the uncut version went on to become Japan's greatest box-office success thus far and placed second on the *Kinema Jumbo* annual survey.

After *Tokyo Olympiad*, Natto Wada retired from filmmaking. Ichikawa says his wife "doesn't like the new film grammar, the method of presentation of the material; she says there's no heart in it any more, that people no longer take human love seriously."...Ichikawa was one of eight directors from various countries who contributed to *Visions of Eight* (1973), a composite portrait of the Munich Olympics. As his subject he chose the 100-meter race, which he depicted mainly in slow motion, the cameras (thirty-five were used) dwelling on the movements and facial expressions of the runners as they strive toward the finish. He chose the race, he said, because "it represents the most typical example of modern man....The speed itself—a speed of ten seconds—but I think also that the effort to break the world's record may reflect the agony or pain of the competition in life, with which people are living at present."...

*Sasame yuki* (*The Makioka Sisters*, 1983) is Ichikawa's most widely acclaimed picture since the mid-1960s....*Ohan* (*Ohan*, 1984—Ichikawa's next film...according to Jay Carr "As in *The Makioka Sisters*, Ichikawa uses cherry blossoms to herald a barren resolution. Few directors match his rhapsodic use of color. Repeatedly he uses bright patterns on cloth against drab background, making them assertions of life. Yet, in the end, it's the woman's gentle gallantry—and Ichikawa's calm, delicate, masterly hand—that make *Ohan* touching."

The next year Ichikawa remade his 1956 classic *Birumo no Tategoto* (*The Burmese Harp*) in color and CinemaScope. Many critics found the result "corny and dated" (Jeff Baskin, who added, it doesn't know where to stop"), but the remake was

nevertheless selected as the closing film for the first Tokyo International Film Festival. Released around the fortieth anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it became a surprise blockbuster....

Ichikawa's models include Mizoguchi, Ozu, Kurosawa, Kinoshita, and Pasolini, who became for him the greatest of modern filmmakers: he studied their work carefully, he says, and then "started all over on my own." Joan Mellen says that "of all Japanese directors, Ichikawa affects the most aesthetic distance from his subject." While acknowledging that he is "one of the great craftsmen of the Japanese cinema," she finds too many of Ichikawa's films "shallow and devoid of any serious content." Others regard him as an artist and humanist of the calibre of Ozu.



**from Kon Ichikawa. Edited by James Quant. Cinematheque Ontario Monographs. Toronto, 2001.**

James Quant Introduction: Ichikawa the Innovator, or the Complicated Case of Kon Ichikawa.

"Ichikawa, the master of paradox."—Langdon Dewey

Judging the accomplishment of Kon Ichikawa is more difficult than that of perhaps any other Japanese director. In a career extending from the mid-thirties to the present, he has made almost eighty films, widely variant in genre, theme, style and tone—alternately, often simultaneously, sardonic and sentimental, deadpan and apocalyptic. Perhaps because many have never been subtitled and only a handful have been distributed in the West, Ichikawa's reputation here now rests on fewer than ten films, most from one decade: three classics of postwar humanist cinema (*Fires on the Plains*, *Harp of Burma*, *Enjo*), two social comedies based on Junichiro Tanizaki novels

(*Kagi, The Makioka Sisters*), the wild comic spectacle *An Actor's Revenge*, and the documentary, *Tokyo Olympiad*, which has been released in many versions and continues to be the subject of considerable controversy. The problems of apprehension and evaluation posed by the diversity and magnitude of Ichikawa's oeuvre are compounded by other factors, notably the formidable influence of his wife and scenarist, Natto Wada, whose withdrawal from writing his scripts in the mid-sixties marked a turning point in his career; and the difficulties he encountered with the studios, who occasionally punished his failures and transgressions by assigning him dubious projects, or hired him only on "salvage operations." Among the postwar Japanese masters, Ichikawa has long been an unlikely candidate for analysis; critical and curatorial interest increasingly focuses on the "expressive margins" of Japanese cinema, and even if not always anti-canonical, has ignored or denigrated Ichikawa as an opportunist, dandy, or mere stylist. (French critics, with an innate auteurist bias, have largely disregarded his work, whereas British critics were the first to champion it.) A similar preference for the extremes of the transcendental and domestic, or the kinetic and wanton, in Japanese film, forms a continuum on which Ichikawa's films can rarely be situated, further averting attention from him. While often referred to as a link between "the golden age" of Japanese cinema and the New Wave, Ichikawa has rarely been given his due as an innovator; his stylistic and thematic experiments deserve greater critical attention than they have hitherto received.



The monist impulse of auteurism tends to suppress multiplicity by ignoring or explaining away variation; if unable to do either, it devalues the filmmaker whose diversity cannot be tamed or taxonomized. Perhaps this is why, of the four Japanese directors first acknowledged in the west as masters—Kenji Mizoguchi, Yasujiro Ozu, Akira Kurosawa, and Kon Ichikawa—the last is the least recognized, though he is the only one of the quartet still alive, and despite his advanced age, is still extraordinarily prolific....

The categories imposed on Ichikawa's work have often been broad grids of tone or genre, following the director's own early division of his work into films that are "light"—"my Disney side,"

he calls it—and those that are "dark." This simple antinomy is complicated, as so much is in the case of Ichikawa, by paradox and prolificacy. There are not two sides to Ichikawa, but several, as the title of Donald Richie's influential early essay on the director suggests....

As is frequently pointed out by both Ichikawa and his commentators, his apprenticeship in *manga* films and animation (*animé*) shaped his approach to narrative structure and visual composition, which tends to be both graphically organized, asymmetrical and dynamic, cursive in its articulation....

His most recent films, the animated doll feature *Shinsengumi*, and *Dora-Heita*, a long-cherished personal project, based on a thirty-year-old script co-written by Ichikawa, Kinoshita, Kurosawa, and Kobayashi, suggest a return to his roots. In *Dora-Heita*'s determinedly old-fashioned, crafty recreation of the samurai genre, Ichikawa's tale of an "alley cat" magistrate who dispenses wisdom and havoc as he cleans up a corrupt fiefdom characteristically mixes tones and devices—slapstick and philosophy, moral drama and ribaldry, frantic action and formal, static

compositions, period detail and synthesized music. Ichikawa predictably denies any retrospective intent in these two films; He tells Mark Schilling in an interview conducted for this book: "I'm only interested in making films that excite me,

that I can make in my own way. That's all.... Films are films. If you don't understand that, then you start filming lies." ...

Ichikawa: I still think that silent films are the summit of film art. I am so sorry that I was not able to make a silent film myself because I was born too late.

Mori: I didn't know you were so infatuated with making a silent film. What did you think about foreign films?

Ichikawa: I admired Ernst Lubitsch, especially his *Design for Living*, a story of three men involved with one woman. The film was very subtle, and the refined and tasteful direction produced high-class eroticism. The cast was gorgeous, too: Miriam Hopkins, Gary Cooper and Frederic March. In contrast, Lubitsch's



*The Man I Killed* was a very serious drama. Both were excellent. I also liked John Ford's *The Informer*, Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once*, Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*, Willi Forst's *Leise flehen meine Lieder*. I later learned many things from, or simply enjoyed, Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *A Letter to Three Wives*, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, Jean Renoir's *The River*, Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la bête*....



### Donald Richie “The Several Sides of Kon Ichikawa”

There is another side to Ichikawa. Animation stops, the funny stories cease, and he simply sits, cigarette dangling, his eyes large and sad behind his glasses. This is the Ichikawa who made *Harp of Burma*, and went on to complete his best pictures. “*Burma*—oh, but I wanted to make that film. That was the first film I really felt I had to make.”...

Ichikawa's sense of anguish has caused him endless difficulties with those motion picture companies in particular—who insist that life is fun and humanity happy. He has got into some kind of troubles with every company he has ever worked for, and particularly serious were those with Daiei's Masaichi Naga (Japan's L. B. Mayer, and the man who walked out of the screening of his own *Rashomon*) who, to punish the director of *Kagi*, insisted that he make the blockbuster *The Great Wall of China*. Ichikawa refused and was suspended. Relations between the two strained to the snapping point, and then, in the local uproar over the Olympic picture (the committee had wanted a straight newsreel), they snapped.

“Of course, there is another reason for my troubles,” says Ichikawa. “Any director who is any good has to be an absolutist. Like Kurosawa. Both of us fight like anything to get what we want and that is why we both have the same reputation with the film companies. You know—uncooperative, stubborn,

wasteful, etc.”...

“The other reason that I try to visualize everything is that I'm the kind of person who has to see something—even in my own imagination—before I understand it. I started as a painter and I still think like one. That is why the camera is so important to me. I plan all the set-ups and I always check the framing, and I usually try to work with someone I know and like, a cameraman such as Kazuo Miyagawa [who did *Bonchi* and *Enjo* and *Kagi*, as well as *Rashomon*, *Ugetsu*, and Ozu's *Floating Weeds*] or Jyuichi Nagano [a discovery of Susumu Hani's, who was cameraman on the Olympic film]. I design the sets too, usually—it was fun doing the *Genji* ones—and I'd probably do the music too if I could. I don't know much about music but I'm thinking of going to school and learning.”

One of the results of this intense visualization is what has come to be known in the industry as “the Ichikawa look.” It owes much less to traditional art than it does to modern graphic design. The angular pattern is usually bold, the balance is almost always asymmetrical, the framing is precise, and yet the composition rarely calls attention to itself. Here the “cartoon” influence is seen strongly, not specifically Disney but those animated films (UPA was an early example) which were designed by graphic artists. ... “People are always surprised at my humour and then they are always surprised at the bleakness of whatever philosophy I have. To me they seem perfectly complementary. All sides of a person add up to that person, you know. Somebody called the Olympic picture a ‘hymn to life,’ and that I guess is what I am about. I'm only guessing though. I can't define it any better than I have in my films. After all, a director only has his films to talk 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.”

### Joan Mellen “Interview with Kon Ichikawa”

Mellen: Which European and American films or directors most affected you?

Ichikawa: I should mention the names of filmmakers who moved me very much rather than individual titles. Among them, in America, Charlie Chaplin stands out, as does William Wellman. In France, René Clair. Nor can I forget Sternberg and Lubitsch.



“The Uniqueness of Kon Ichikawa: A Symposium”  
Kon Ichikawa, Akira Iwasaki, Kyushiro Kusakabe

Kusakabe: The purpose of this series of symposiums is to discover unknown faces of various films. The films of Kon Ichikawa are the subject of today’s discussion, which may prove interesting since we have you here with us, Mr. Ichikawa.

Ichikawa: I don’t really understand myself, so I’ll just smile.

**“Kon Ichikawa at Eighty-six: A “Mid-Career” Interview” Mark Schilling**

This interview with Kon Ichikawa took place on July 7, 2000 at the director’s home. A short taxi ride from Shibuya, a Tokyo entertainment district packed with seething crowds of under-twenty-fives most hours of the day and night. Ichikawa’s neighborhood is quiet, sedate, wealthy. His house, situated on a rise and flanked by high concrete walls, is barely visible from the street, much like a medieval castle keep.

The house itself, however, is less sixteenth century Japan than modern-day California, with its small but immaculately kept lawn, white exterior and large plate-glass windows. Greeting us at the door, Ichikawa was welcoming but a bit wary; he was not altogether sure about the purpose of the interview.

After introductions and explanations, however, he answered our questions with the briskness and conciseness of the director as get-it-done dynamo. Impatient with inquiries related to the longevity of his career, or the wisdom he had supposedly gained thereby—he released his first film in 1948—he plunged into discussions about the process of filmmaking with frankness and enthusiasm....

ICHIKAWA: Television and films both basically look at life and human beings through a frame. From a director’s point of view, they aren’t much different in that regard. But in terms of style, there is a big difference. With films, the audience has made a choice to be sitting there in the dark. With television, I’m sitting here in my own house and the TV is telling me to watch something, whether I particularly want to or not. So there is a difference in that way. You have

to change your method of filming accordingly.

SCHILLING: Technically, in terms of picture quality, films and TV are becoming more alike.

ICHIKAWA: That’s true. Technically they are getting closer, but film is still film and television, television. Even with high-definition video, there is still a big

difference in the way you go about filming—at least that’s what I think. For example, with a TV drama, you have to do a lot of explaining—you have to tell the audience what is going on very directly. That’s because they’re sitting at home watching. With television, the phone is ringing, people are talking, drinking tea, and doing various other things. You’re bringing this program to them, in the midst of their daily lives.

You have to be aware of that. When I’m on the set, I’m not so aware of it, but I am conscious that some kind of explanation is necessary. With film, you’re freer—you can create your own world. I’m not saying, though, that because you’re making TV you can cheapen the content. Even with TV drama, you’re examining life and human beings. So the basic approach is not all that different (between films and TV dramas). With both, you have something to say, a theme you want to express. Stylistically, though, they’re somewhat different....

ICHIKAWA: I’ve made about seventy films—that’s a lot. When I was at my peak, I was making as many as three films a year. More than half of those films, though, were not ones I wanted to make, but ones that a company or producer or actor asked me to make. “I want to do this, so let’s get Ichikawa.” In that case, the problem becomes one of how to film the material. In other words, it’s not material I have developed myself, but that someone has brought to me. Even so, I have to do everything possible to make it my own.. I have to ask myself whether the material allows me to do that. If I can’t put my own stamp on it, I turn down the assignment. I feel a sense of responsibility for the assignments I take on. At the same time, if I can’t make the material my own, I’ll say no. I’ve made some dogs doing that. “Oh no-what have I done!”—that kind of thing. (Laughs) But that’s the way I make films. If something resonates within me when I read a



certain piece of literature, I want to make it into a movie. That's how I make a novel mine....

SCHILLING: When you read a novel, are the images more important than the words?

ICHIKAWA: More than the images, I'm looking for the spirit behind the words, the spirit of what the author wrote. You first have to understand what the author was trying to say. Then you have to ask yourself whether you agree with it, whether it makes sense to you. Those ideas are in the story; it's not necessary to think about the story per se. ...

SCHILLING: You made one other war film prior to *Fires on the Plain*, *Harp of Burma* (1956). That also had a big impact. Then nearly twenty years later, in 1985, you remade it in colour. Did you want to communicate the film's anti-war message to a new generation?

ICHIKAWA: Yes, that's partly why. For young people today, the hero is a wonderful man, an ideal Japanese....

SCHILLING: As you know, a series of your films is going on tour in North America and Europe. Is there one film that you especially want foreign audiences to see?

ICHIKAWA: I can't say. When I make a film, I never think about taking it to a foreign film festival or have foreigners watch it. When I make a film, it's for me. Of course, because I'm a Japanese I naturally want to screen it in Japan, but I never think that I want to show it in America or France, or Africa.

SCHILLING: No interest in the foreign market then?

ICHIKAWA: Not really. But films—I know I'm not saying anything original here—are a world language. That's what they should be, anyway. People of whatever race wonder about what happiness is, what life is and wrestle with those questions in the films they make. Even so, I never think about having people in America or Europe watch this or that film of mine. My films may be difficult for them to

understand because of differences in culture or language or customs, but that can't be helped....



Cinematic styles change. After the war there was Italian neorealism, then the French New Wave. Various new approaches came in. We were influenced by all of them. And it's true that the way we made movies changed as a result. What hasn't changed is the basic way we look at human beings. Mores and manners change, the cut of a suit changes, but the way we look at human beings doesn't change so much.

### **The Burma campaign (Wikipedia)**

A series of battles fought in the British colony of [Burma](#). It was part of the [South-East Asian theatre of World War II](#) and primarily involved forces of the [Allies](#); the [British Empire](#) and the [Republic of China](#), with support from the [United States](#). They faced against the invading forces of [Imperial Japan](#), who were supported by the [Thai Phayap Army](#), as well as two [collaborationist](#) independence movements and armies, the first being the [Burma Independence Army](#), which spearheaded the initial attacks against the country. [Puppet states were established](#) in the conquered areas and [territories were annexed](#), while the international [Allied](#) force in [British India](#) launched [several failed offensives](#). [During the later 1944 offensive into India](#) and subsequent [Allied recapture of Burma](#) the [Indian National Army](#), led by revolutionary [Subhas C. Bose](#) and his "[Free India](#)", were also fighting together with Japan. British Empire forces peaked at around 1,000,000 land and air forces, and were drawn primarily from [British India](#), with British Army forces (equivalent to eight regular infantry divisions and six tank regiments),<sup>[31]</sup> 100,000 East and West African colonial troops, and smaller numbers of land and air forces from several other Dominions and Colonies.<sup>[6]</sup>

The campaign had a number of notable features. The geographical characteristics of the region meant that weather, disease and terrain had a major effect on operations. The lack of transport infrastructure placed an emphasis on military engineering and air transport to move and supply troops, and evacuate wounded. The campaign was also politically complex, with the British, the United States and the Chinese all having different strategic priorities.

It was also the only land campaign by the Western Allies in the Pacific Theatre which proceeded continuously from the start of hostilities to the end of the war. This was due to its geographical location. By extending from South East Asia to India, its area included some lands which the British lost at the outset of the war, but also included areas of India wherein the Japanese advance was eventually stopped.

The climate of the region is dominated by the seasonal monsoon rains, which allowed effective campaigning for only just over half of each year. This, together with other factors such as famine and disorder in British India and the priority given by the Allies to the defeat of Nazi Germany, prolonged the campaign and divided it into four phases: the Japanese invasion, which led to the expulsion of British, Indian and Chinese forces in 1942; failed attempts by the Allies to mount offensives into

Burma, from late 1942 to early 1944; the 1944 Japanese invasion of India, which ultimately failed following the battles of Imphal and Kohima; and finally the successful Allied offensive which liberated Burma from late-1944 to mid-1945.

... The military and political results of the Burma campaign have been contentious to historians. It was suggested by some American historians that the campaign did not greatly contribute to the defeat of Japan except for distracting significant Japanese land forces away from China or the Pacific, although this opinion is partisan and hotly disputed. They suggest the Japanese retention of control of Burma was in military terms irrelevant to the ultimate fate of Japan. Generally, the recovery of Burma is reckoned as a triumph for the British Indian Army and resulted in the greatest defeat the Japanese armies had suffered to that date.

### **COMING UP IN THE FALL 2021 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS 43:**

- September 28 Satyajit Ray THE MUSIC ROOM (1958)
- October 5 Andrei Tarkovsky ANDREI RUBLEV (1966)
- October 12 Stanley Kubrick BARRY LYNDON (1975)
- October 19 Roman Polanski CHINATOWN (1974)
- October 26 Roland Joffé THE MISSION (1986)
- November 2 Mike Nichols CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR (2007)
- November 9 Asghar Farhadi A SEPARATION (2011)
- November 16 Hsiao-Hsien Hou THE ASSASSIN (2015)
- November 23 Chloé Zhan NOMADLAND (2020)
- November 30 Rob Reiner THE PRINCESS BRIDE (1987)

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- ....for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/>

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# Myanmar (Burma) and the rest of Southeast Asia

