

✓ **Yojimbo (PG)**

**27th November 2006**

Director: **Akira Kurosawa**  
Japan 1961

Running time : 110 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Toshirô Mifune** (Sanjuro Kuwabatake), **Tatsuya Nakadai** (Unosuke, gunfighter), **Yôko Tsukasa** (Nui), **Isuzu Yamada** (Orin), **Takashi Shimura** (Tokuemon, sake brewer).

SCRIPT: **Ryuzo Kikushima, Akira Kurosawa**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Kazuo Miyagawa**. EDITING: **Akira Kurosawa**. MUSIC: **Masaru Satô**.

The remaking of *Rashomon*, *Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo* in the west within years of their appearance says much for the popularity of this director's work here. Perhaps it is to do with the fact that his films feature strong individuals within a rigid culture where personal happiness is sacrificed to the needs of society (imagine a western without strong individuals!). Perhaps also it is to do with the fact that these characters are so often played by Mifune, an actor whose instinctive approach and fiery technique raise the emotional bar in a way more palatable to western audiences.

Whatever the case it is telling that Leone chose this particular property for his Italian western template, for it is noticeably less heroic than the classic Kurosawa drama; instead the hallmarks are cynicism and brutality – not exactly foreign to the *Dollars* trilogy.

The setup will be familiar to viewers of *A Fistful of Dollars*. Mifune plays a wandering samurai, now without allegiances, who lands up in a godforsaken town dominated by two rival gangs. He proceeds to play one off against the other by touting himself as a blade for hire and then betraying his employers.

The film begins as we track Sanjuro (Mifune), seen only from behind, through a windswept landscape to a peasant village. Peasants in Japanese films are viewed with at best condescension, at worst contempt, and Sanjuro is no exception. For some reason he decides to stay and help the villagers, and it is not through the idealism of the seven samurai in the earlier film of that name. Indeed it is this question that lends some depth to what is essentially an action film. Does Sanjuro help simply because he is bored, or does his lack of a master lead him to seek his cause in a gratuitously heroic act? Whatever the case – and I tend to the former view – he sets about his task with total commitment, at first toying with his prey, then

finishing it off when the game gets too dangerous.

The script is peppered with laconic dialogue that betrays Kurosawa's fascination for western sources: 'Cooper, two coffins...no, maybe three.' 'Kill one or a hundred. You only hang once.' 'If I don't have my pistol, I feel sort of naked.' (It is worth signalling at this point that the story earlier appears as a Dashiell Hammett novel, *Red Desert*, filmed more directly by Walter Hill as the execrable *Last Man Standing*.)

Kurosawa marshals his material well, spacing out the violent episodes with careful exposition of place and character, but when the violence does come it is startlingly full-blooded next to the restraint of *Seven Samurai*. Mifune swaggers through his role with wicked humour – watch his facial expressions – and athleticism. But spare an eye for Shimura in the uncharacteristically small role as the sake brewer. It is he more than Mifune who was John Wayne to Kurosawa's John Ford, for the collaboration spanned the entirety of the director's career, culminating in *Kagemusha*. A gentler, more reflective actor, he is a giant of Japanese cinema who made nearly two hundred films.

All in all, then, a film ripe with influences backwards as well as forwards, and best viewed as an introduction to Kurosawa's work rather than as an epitome of it.

**David Clare**