

Akira Kurosawa

Cutting edge of cinema

IN HIS honest, humane and wise autobiography, inspired by that of Jean Renoir, Akira Kurosawa, who has died aged 88, described a shattering experience in Tokyo when he was 13 years old: the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923. "Through it I learned not only of the extraordinary powers of nature, but extraordinary things that lie in human hearts."

The quake and the subsequent fire reduced two-thirds of the capital to ashes and took 140,000 lives. Kurosawa's family, living in a hill suburb of Tokyo, was lucky: though the house was damaged, the fires did not reach it. But there was no electricity, and when the neighbourhood's supply of candles was exhausted, the darkness was total and terrible. A rumour spread that Korean residents of the city were somehow responsible for the mayhem, and there was a massacre of Koreans in downtown Tokyo. The aliens were said to have poisoned the wells; strange chalk notations on the wall around a local well were ascribed to a Korean code. In fact the scribbles had been made by the young Kurosawa, who was "flabbergasted" by the irrationality of the adults.

When the holocaust abated, a strong-willed elder brother took Akira on a day-long tour of the blasted and lifeless city. "I saw corpses charred black, half-burned corpses, corpses in gutters, corpses floating in rivers, corpses piled up on bridges, corpses blocking off a whole street at an intersection". Involuntarily, he looked away, but his brother insisted that he look carefully. Back home that night he slept like a log. He asked his brother how it could happen. He told Akira: "If you shut your eyes to a frightening sight, you end up being frightened. If you look at everything straight on, there is nothing to be afraid of."

Though the adult Kurosawa was characteristically reticent about this, it is difficult not to see it reflected in his more than 30 feature films about past and present Japan, which abound in both baseness and nobility, savagery and sophistication, on an epic scale. Films such as *Rashomon*, *Ikiru* (Living), *The Seven Samurai*, *Throne of Blood*, *The Hidden Fortress* and *Dersu Uzala*, that are among the most powerful movies ever made. Not only was their creator Japan's greatest film director, he was one of the greatest 20th-century artists working in any medium.

Kurosawa was born in Tokyo, the youngest of seven children. His mother was from an Osaka merchant community, his father from a samurai family which hailed from a village in the northern part of Honshu. Kurosawa admired his mother for her power of endurance and her "realism", but it was his father, a romantic, who really influenced him; and indeed women were never of central importance to Kurosawa, either in his life or in his films (unlike his fellow directors Mizoguchi and Ozu).

His father was "a strict man of military background" who taught martial arts, helped to build Japan's first swimming pool and worked to make baseball popular. He encouraged his son's ability in kendo swordsmanship, and the young Kurosawa, despite being quite weak as a child, reached the first rank as a swordsman: the source of the

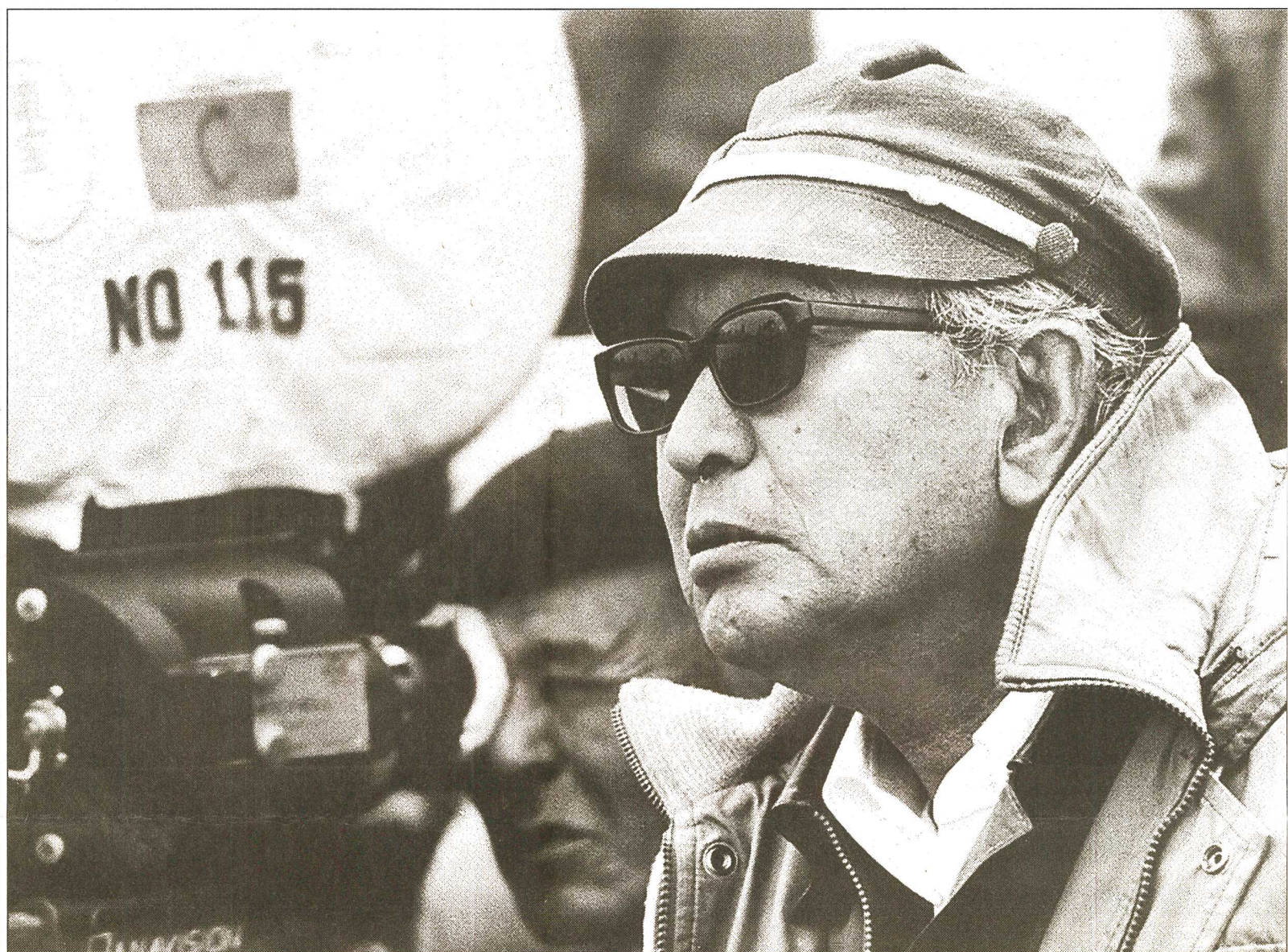
inside knowledge that would enable him to stage enormously exciting duels in films such as *The Hidden Fortress*, *Yojimbo* and *Rashomon*.

But the true samurai spirit — bushido — inculcated by his father always mattered more to Kurosawa than the samurai's outward trappings. Donald Richie, Kurosawa's leading western interpreter, defined it thus: "compassionate steadfastness, complete moral honesty, inability to compromise, and action through belief". When Hollywood borrowed *The Seven Samurai* to make *The Magnificent Seven*, and Sergio Leone borrowed *Yojimbo* to make *A Fistful of Dollars* — thereby launching Clint Eastwood as the "Man With No Name" — Kurosawa was not impressed (though he was a keen admirer of John Ford). Japanese samurai had been replaced by Wild West gunmen who were basically gangsters. Samurai are the total opposite of gangsters, said a wry Kurosawa; but these Westerns had turned them into men nearly as worthless as their enemies, the bandits who were attacking the townspeople.

After leaving school, Kurosawa dabbled in many arts, read voraciously both Japanese and western literature, particularly the Russian classics — he later adapted Dostoevsky and Gorky — and saw a large number of films under the tutelage of his elder brother, who had established himself as a successful narrator for silent film. (After talks arrived, he committed suicide, which shook Kurosawa as much as the earthquake.)

Kurosawa showed real promise as a painter, and began selling illustrations to magazines. He was also loosely associated with a revolutionary proletarian movement, though communism did not make much impression on him. It never crossed his mind to become a filmmaker until he happened to notice an advertisement by the young film studio PCL (later Toho) asking for assistant directors. Despite having no university degree and little demonstrable achievement, Kurosawa was selected.

The years at Toho, from 1936 until he directed his first film *Sanshiro Sugata* in 1943, were gruelling for Kurosawa, but they gave him experience of almost every aspect of filmmaking. His chief teacher, the considerable director Kajiro Yamamoto, once told a magazine: "All I ever taught Kurosawa was how to drink." Kurosawa, by contrast, reckoned he had learned hugely from Yamamoto. "His attitude was that in order to train his assistant directors it was worth sacrificing his own pictures... How is it possible



Through a glass darkly... Kurosawa in 1980 on the set of *Kagemusha*, one of the later films that lacked the vitality of his early masterpieces

to express one's gratitude to someone so selfless?"

The beginning of the Pacific war and Kurosawa's "desperate battle to become a director" coincided. By August 1945, he had managed to complete four features, working in the teeth of military censorship. The most innocuous scene might be rejected as "British-American" while the use of march music by Sousa, the famous US bandleader, would pass unnoticed. (Later Kurosawa defended his frequent use of western music on the grounds that Japanese audiences would not understand traditional Japanese music.)

SO INFURIATED did the censors make Kurosawa — a "short-tempered and obstinate man", by his own admission — that he made a pact with some friends towards the end of the war when all Japan was contemplating the Honourable Death of the Hundred Million: before taking their

own lives, they would assassinate the censors.

As for the war itself, Kurosawa offered no resistance to Japanese militarism, which shamed him then and afterwards. On August 15, 1945, walking to the studio to hear Emperor Hirohito's surrender broadcast, he saw the preparations for mass suicide; shop-owners were staring at the bare blades of their unsheathed swords. On the way back, the very same people were bustling about with cheerful faces as if preparing for a festival.

"I don't know if this represents Japanese adaptability or Japanese imbecility," he wrote in 1981. "In either case, I have to recognise that both these facets exist in the Japanese personality. Both facets exist within my own personality as well." Perhaps this accounted for his unbalanced attitude towards the dropping of the atomic bomb in his 1991 film *Rhapsody in August*, for which he was rightly attacked by western critics.

Rashomon, made in 1950, brought Kurosawa, and indeed Japanese cinema as a whole, to the attention of a curious world. Shown at the Venice Film Festival in 1951, the film was a sensation and carried off the Grand Prix. In India, it helped to inspire a would-be director later deeply admired by Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray, who called *Rashomon* "the kind of film that immediately suggests a culmination, a fruition, rather than a beginning. You could not — as a film-making nation — have a *Rashomon* and nothing to show before it." The story of a rape and a death in feudal Japan hundreds of years ago, told in four sections from the four participants' contradictory points of view, *Rashomon* is a timeless work of universal appeal. As Kurosawa described it, "Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing."

The 15 years after *Rashomon* were Kurosawa's golden period. His finest film of all (and his own favourite), *The Seven Samurai* (1954), seems to contain the whole of human experience in the relationships that develop between a village and the samurai hired by the villagers to defend themselves from pillage by ruthless robbers.

It is an action picture to end all action pictures, a hymn to movement, but it is also profound philosophy. Plot and psychology are here in a perfect balance, never quite achieved by Kurosawa again. The closing scene distils all that has gone before: the courage of the samurai has won the battle, but the surviving samurai know that the meek villagers will win the peace. The richness and intensity of the film is that of tragedy by

Shakespeare, whose *Macbeth* and *King Lear* Kurosawa later adapted (as *Throne of Blood* and *Ran*).

After 1965, Kurosawa's career went into steep decline. His magnificent lead actor, Toshiro Mifune, left him because of his mammoth shooting schedules. The high cost of his film antagonised Japanese producers. And though his audiences in Japan were generally favourable, the Japanese press throughout his career accused him of purveying an exotic Japan to the West. This was both wounding and willfully blinkered, given the rapid and rather mindless westernisation of Japan after the war, which Kurosawa much disliked. But it is true that Kurosawa was a much more western artist than, say, Mizoguchi and Ozu: "fifty per cent western, I think", Satyajit Ray once told me, "and so am I". (For some years Kurosawa used to send me a Christmas card illustrated afresh each year by himself; it showed a gaudy Father Christmas with just a hint of a samurai.)

Eventually, after a widely publicised falling out over a Hollywood mega-project in 1968 and a commercial flop with a Japanese-financed small-budget film, Kurosawa attempted suicide in 1971. His fortunes revived with Russian help (*Dersu Uzala*), French help (*Ran*), and the backing of younger Hollywood directors, Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas (*Kagemusha*) and Steven Spielberg (*Dreams*, in which Martin Scorsese acted a small role). But, enchanting, gorgeous, cruel and grand as all these films variously are, with the exception of *Dersu* they lack Kurosawa's former vitality.

Nevertheless, we have the masterpieces, which will never be forgotten. They are how Kurosawa, an extremely private man, wanted to be remembered. "I don't really like talking about my film", he wrote in *Something Like an Autobiography*. "Everything I want to say is in the film itself; for me to say anything more is, as the proverb goes, like 'drawing legs on a picture of a snake'."

Andrew Robinson

Akira Kurosawa, film director, born March 23, 1910; died September 6, 1998



Toshiro Mifune and Machiko Kyo in *Rashomon*

The true samurai spirit inculcated by his father always mattered more to Kurosawa than the samurai's outward trappings

Nigel Slater
travelled far and