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Ran

Director: Akira Kurosawa Country: Japan Date: 1985

A review by Vincent Canby for *The New York Times*:

In any context, in any year, the grandeur of Akira Kurosawa's "Ran" could not go easily unrecognized. One would have to be willfully blind. In this mingy season, however, "Ran" is almost a religious experience - an epiphany, a reminder that there still can be life before one softens to death in the ooze of late 20th-century popular culture. "Ran" stands above all other 1985-86 movies with the implacable presence of a force of nature. That, at least, was the revivifying impression on seeing it again at the Cinema Studio the other Thursday afternoon, nearly nine months after watching it the first time at the New York Film Festival, and in the 25th week of its continuing first-run engagement.

With the popular success of "Ran," it's clear that Kurosawa remains a glorious anachronism -an independent, self-absorbed artist in a field that's totally dependent on profits from investments that (considering all of the other needs of our society) are unconscionably extravagant. Yet he doesn't make movies that, by the stretch of anybody's imagination, could be said to possess built-in appeal.

He's survived into old age in an art ravaged by the constant search for the "new." He's persisted in making only those films that express his own concerns (with, among other things, man's moral responsibilities and his relation to the universe), in a style that pays little attention to current fashions but, instead, is virtually an anthology of cinema from its earliest days to the present. It's not an arbitrary style, but a form dictated by the subject matter that, in turn, is illuminated by visual eloquence.

Brought in on a budget of $12 million (which is approximately half of what "Ghostbusters" cost), "Ran" is the most expensive film ever made in Japan. What's even more intimidating is that it's Kurosawa's version of Shakespeare's "King Lear." In this darkening day and age, even planning a $12 million "Lear," much less actually making it, would seem to be grounds for the court's appointment of a legal guardian. In the place of a legal guardian, Kurosawa has a producer who shares something of the director's infinitely optimistic madness - France's Serge Silberman, the man largely responsible for making the final years of Luis Bunuel's career so abundantly productive.

"Ran," which translates as either "chaos" or "turmoil," is long - just under three hours - but it's also a rousing, exotically costumed, period melodrama that works from the viscera upward to the brain. It's an epic whose spectacularly staged and photographed battle scenes (equaled only by those in Olivier's "Henry V") are both functions of the fable being told and hallucinatory representations of the emotional chaos in which Hidetora, the film's gullible old Lear, finds himself.

Hidetora is not really Lear, nor is "Ran" a "King Lear" transposed to feudal Japan. Kurosawa has borrowed what he wanted from Shakespeare (which is quite a lot) to give bleak point to the apparently well-known legend of Motonari Mori, a 16th-century warlord whose three sons are regarded as examples of filial virtue in Japan. Feeling that Shakespeare never adequately explained why Lear brought down such a terrible fate on himself, Kurosawa has supplied his own reasons while turning a favorite tale inside out.

Hidetora, now a vain, arrogant, physically failing tyrant of 70, has acquired his vast domain during a life devoted to nonstop wars of a ferocity and brutality that, he fondly believes in his dotage, have led to this time of peace and plenty. He has married off his two eldest sons to the daughters of defeated chiefs and, as "Ran" opens, is considering bids from two other warlords who offer their daughters in marriage to Hidetora's youngest son, Saburo. At this marriage conference, the old man announces that he's retiring. He's dividing his lands among the three sons and asks them to swear allegiance to him and to one another. Only Saburo objects, not because he's an innocent but because he realizes that such a fragile understanding will be no adequate defense against the violence and greed that are his father's most enduring legacies.

Saburo is immediately banished, but it's not his brothers who are the principal causes of Hidetora's undoing - they're totally faithless, but not very imaginative. Kurosawa's most nervy invention is Lady Kaede, the delicate, seemingly self-efacing wife of Hidetora's eldest son, Taro. At the proper time, Kaede becomes an amalgam of Goneril, Regan and Lady Macbeth, though she's a woman fired not by ambition but by revenge on the clan that murdered her family and installed her in luxurious bondage.

As played by Mieko Harada, Lady Kaede is so supremely, breathtakingly evil that her audacity is exhilarating. She's a spellbinding woman and a character of truly Shakespearean proportions. She can hold a dagger to a man's throat one minute, and start slowly to cut, and, in the next minute, seduce the poor fellow so effectively that he thinks he doesn't want to live without her.

In counterpoint to Lady Kaede, Kurosawa introduces Lady Sue, the wife of Jiro, Hidetora's second son. She has submerged her grief not in a lust for revenge but in a Buddhism that has released her from what might be called "misdirected desire." There are plenty of parallels to "Lear" in "Ran," including the faithful Fool, the "mad" scenes on a Japanese heath, and even some lines ("I have tales to tell, forgiveness to ask"), but "Ran" is a magnificent original. I suppose that "Ran" is a tragedy, but Hidetora, played with high theatricality by Tatsuya Nakadai in exaggerated, Noh theater makeup, doesn't exactly elicit pity. Like the film's vast landscapes and elaborate castles, like the apocalyptic battle scenes, and like the violent weather that accompanies its great events, Hidetora is awesome. As in all of Kurosawa's greatest characters - from the dying bureaucrat in "Ikaru" to the warlord's peasant "double" in "Kagemusha," there's also in Hidetora a streak of stubbornness that becomes heroic.

Kurosawa regards Hidetora with concern that extends to the entire human condition. In the past, Kurosawa's so-called humanism has been praised by being equated with a sort of easy optimism, exemplified by the poor woodcutter's adoption of the baby at the end of "Rashomon." He's far more rigorous now. Kurosawa is a humanist, but in "Ran" he expresses himself with no hint of sentimentality.

"Ran" is very much the work of a man who's lived a long, rich and sometimes deeply troubled life. Now there's no time left to cater to the genteel sensibilities of others. In spite of all its beauty, "Ran" is blunt. It makes its points abruptly, which may be what his younger Japanese critics mean when today they describe the Kurosawa oeuvre as "old-fashioned." It's hugely entertaining but never soothing.

Kurosawa said somewhere recently that he wouldn't attempt to make a film about life in contemporary Japan. His reason: he couldn't possibly express everything he wanted to say about a society in the midst of such devastating changes. The world is moving too fast for him to dare to undertake the sort of social satires, comedies and dramas that he turned out with such exuberance in the late 1940's, 1950's and 1960's. However, by looking into the past, as he is in "Ran" and the earlier "Kagemusha," he's not escaping from the present but only clearing away its modish debris, in this way to be able to deal more efficiently (and with less emotionalism) with themes common to all men, in all eras. Much like Kurosawa at this point, "Ran," a masterpiece, stands outside time.

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(The original review has been slightly cut-down to fit in here.)

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