

The Double-Edged Sword: The Films of Shintaro Katsu & Raizo Ichikawa



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The 1960s saw two of the most popular stars of Japanese post-WWII cinema grace movie screens.

Like a strange but wonderful hybrid of Charlie Chaplin, Robert Mitchum, Wallace Beery and Clint Eastwood, Shintaro Katsu started out at Daiei Studios in the mid-1950s and labored pretty much unrecognized in period action movies and the occasional more serious “arthouse” film until 1962. That was the year he starred as a wandering blind masseur tired of being picked on who learns to wield a sword in *Tale of Zatoichi* (*Zatoichi Monogatari*) directed by unsung master Kenji Misumi. It was popular enough to warrant a sequel, and Katsu’s real-life brother Tomisaburo Wakayama played Zatoichi’s estranged brother and nemesis in the action-packed follow-up, *The Tale of Zatoichi Continues* (*Zoku Zatoichi Monogatari*). After that, with the box office breaking records, Daiei developed the character into a series of films. Katsu continued to portray the beloved blind swordsman in 26 movies as well as over 100 episodes on television. His last appearance as the humble, wisecracking anti-hero was in 1989 in *Zatoichi* (a film Katsu also directed). Katsu also starred in several of nouvelle vague director Yasuzo Masumura’s most memorable pictures, including *Hoodlum Soldier* (*Heitai Yakuza*) and *Yakuza Masterpiece* (*Yakuza Zessho*). In the late 1960s, Katsu formed his own production company, going on to produce most of the later Zatoichi films as well as all six of the *Lone Wolf and Cub* series (once again starring his brother, Tomisaburo Wakayama).

Now imagine Montgomery Clift as an action star, and you get a faint idea of the image of Katsu’s Daiei Studios’ colleague, Raizo Ichikawa. Descended from a long line of kabuki performers, he started his movie career around the same time as Katsu in the mid-1950s, making period drama and action films as well as more “serious” pictures for directors like Kenji Mizoguchi (*New Tales of the Taira Clan*) and Kon Ichikawa (*Enjo*). But his most famous role remains Kyoshiro Nemuri, a misanthropic, half-breed samurai with God and women issues whose lady-in-waiting mother had been raped by a Portuguese missionary during a Black Mass, thus resulting in his birth. The film series featuring the Nemuri character – known in English-speaking countries as *Sleepy Eyes of Death/Son of the Black Mass* –

grew gradually more existential and macabre as the series progressed, and the Nemuri character had his coldblooded side, conflicted within by both benevolent and misanthropic impulses. Ichikawa also appeared in the loosely linked *Sword* (Ken) trilogy directed by Kenji Misumi – all of them masterpieces: *Destiny's Son* (Kiru), *Sword* (Ken) and *Sword Devil* (Ken Ki). The second-to-last picture starring Ichikawa, *Castle Menagerie* (Nemuri Kyoshiro Akujo Gari) was his last appearance as Nemuri. Ichikawa died of cancer in July of 1969 at the age of 37, mere days before he completed his final movie, *Gambler's Life* (Bakuto Ichidai). Because of his tragic death at a young age as well as his astounding charisma onscreen, Ichikawa continues to enjoy a burgeoning cult status and has often been described as the Japanese James Dean.

Both actors shared a sublime ability to transcend genre stereotypes, creating action heroes who were wounded, soul-searching individuals. Join us for this retrospective tribute honoring two legends of Japanese cinema!

December 11, 2009

Raizo Ichikawa and Shintaro Katsu Together!

SAMURAI VENDETTA (Hakuoki, 1959, Kazuo Mori, 109 min.) Raizo Ichikawa is a young samurai official betrayed by his fiancée's family, with two-fisted Shintaro Katsu as the best friend who tries to help his persecuted comrade. After Ichikawa is shamelessly ambushed, he later returns as an embittered, heart-broken one-armed swordsman. Kazuo Mori directed this oft-filmed fable with an eye for pastoral beauty and tragic romance – Ichikawa's climactic swordfight in the falling snow while his long-separated love looks on, is one of the classic moments in 1950s Japanese period cinema. Filmmaker Mori chose a low profile throughout his career, steering clear of the limelight but was known by critics and colleagues alike for his reliable storytelling skills and attention to character development. Despite the occasional dated music sting, Mori, directing from a script co-written by fellow master filmmaker, Daisuke Ito, delivers a solid, dramatic entertainment. Katsu and Ichikawa both appeared in cameo roles in Kon Ichikawa's *An Actor's Revenge* (aka *Revenge of A Kabuki Actor*, Yukinojo Henge, 1963) and Kenji Misumi's *Buddha* (Shaka, 1961) but, because of their mutual, mushrooming box office clout, they never appeared together in equal co-starring roles again. Co-starring Chitose Maki, Ryosuke Kagawa, Reiko Fujiwara, Fujio Suga.

January 22, 2010

ZATOICHI, THE FUGITIVE (Zatoichi Kyojotabi, 1963, Tokuzo Tanaka, 86 min.) In this fourth installment of the Zatoichi, Blind Swordsman series – and one of the best – director Tokuzo Tanaka ratchets up the scope and dynamics, shooting virtually all of the movie on location in palpably blistering summer heat (cameraman Chishi Makiura's stunning cinematography heralds more great images to come, not only in later Zatoichi pictures but several of the *Lone Wolf & Cub* films as well). After winning an amateur sumo competition at a village festival, Zatoichi (Shintaro Katsu) is forced to kill an over-zealous bounty hunter, then decides to inform the victim's mother, an old yakuza moll. Soon, he's up to his neck dealing with an evil gang boss (stalwart heavy Toru Abe) who is bent on accumulating more territory and a former flame (the bewitching Masayo Banri, who played the same role in the first and second installments of the series) conflicted by her attachment to her cruelly abusive *yojimbo* (bodyguard) boyfriend (Toshitaro Kitashiro). Director Tanaka tightens the screws on the suspense as Ichi enters a contest of wills with the shifting alliance of villains, and a protracted pitched sword battle to settle things erupts at the rugged, rousing climax. Punctuating the proceedings is one of maestro composer Akira Ifukube's most beautiful scores. Co-starring Miwa Takada and Junichiro Narita

February 19, 2010

DESTINY'S SON (Kiru, 1962, Kenji Misumi, 71 min.) Grown-up orphan Raizo Ichikawa is bent on revenge after his adoptive samurai family are murdered by a jealous rival bureaucrat. An astonishing, dreamlike jidai-geki film scripted by Kaneto Shindo (*Onibaba*), adapted from the original novel by Renzaburo Shibata (the creator of one of the most unorthodox anti-heroes in world literature, the half-breed samurai, Kyoshiro Nemuri). Filmmaker Misumi creates a demonic masterpiece awash with surreal landscapes, all packed into a taut 71 minutes and hurtling towards a moving climax of Zen-like transcendence. Underrated maestro Misumi also directed several of the Zatoichi, Blind Swordsman pictures as well as 4 out of 6 of the *Lone Wolf and Cub* installments. This was the first in a loosely-linked trio of films starring Ichikawa (portraying different characters in each) helmed by director Misumi. Much later it came to be known as The Sword trilogy. *Destiny's Son* was followed by *Sword* (Ken,

1964) – the only film shot in black-and-white and set in a contemporary milieu (based on a story by Yukio Mishima) – then came *Sword Devil* (Ken Ki, 1965), yet another surreal samurai saga (once again from a Renzaburo Shibata tale) with a touch of the supernatural. With gorgeous cinematography by Shozo Honda, *Destiny's son's* superb supporting cast features Shigeru Amachi (*Jigoku*), Masayo Banri, Shiho Fujimura and Mayumi Nagisa.

March 20, 2010

ZATOICHI ON THE ROAD (a.k.a. *Zatoichi's Fighting Journey* a.k.a. *Zatoichi and the Scoundrels* aka *Zatoichi Kenka Tabi*, 1963, Kimiyoshi Yasuda, 87 min.) Once again, humble, peace-loving masseur Ichi (Shintaro Katsu) finds himself the target of warring yakuza – some want the bounty on his head, others want to hire him for his legendary sword skills. Meanwhile, he's busy trying to safely escort a kidnapped woman (Shiho Fujimura) back to her family without getting killed in the process. This was the fifth entry in the Blind Swordsman series and established a template for the formula used in many other later installments of the very long-running box-office goldmine. Director Kimiyoshi Yasuda was a strong fixture at Daiei Studios where he lensed virtually all of his efforts. Yasuda shot several more entries in the Blind Swordsman series, including one of the most celebrated, *Zatoichi Meets the One-Armed Swordsman* (1971), which co-starred Hong Kong action martial arts star Jimmy Wang-Yu. Yasuda also was a top-notch fantasy filmmaker, helming the eerie and thrilling *100 Monsters* (Yokai Hyaku Monogatari, 1968) and the first in the *Daimajin* (*Majin, Monster of Terror*) Trilogy (1966). Akira Ifukube supplies another lovely score. With Reiko Fujiwara, Ryuzo Shimada, Matasaburo Tanba.

SCAR YOSABURO (Kirare Yosaburo, 1960, Daisuke Ito, 94 min.) For the uninitiated, director Daisuke Ito could plausibly be described as a combination of American directors John Ford and King Vidor. Ito possessed a similar classical grounding to Ford, as well as occasionally gave forth bursts of Vidor-like emotional delirium, melded together into entertainments with artistic integrity. Like both those filmmakers, he was a silent film pioneer who thrived in the sound era with his intelligent, romantic period pieces that never resorted to cheap sentiment. In *Scar Yosaburo*, an actor (Raizo Ichikawa) from a wandering theatrical troupe has his face mutilated by vengeful yakuza thugs after he's caught with a gang boss's mistress (played by Tamao Nakamura – who coincidentally was actor Shintaro Katsu's real-life spouse). Despite his physical and emotional wounds, Yosaburo later manages to find true love with a young noblewoman (Manami Fuji) who is being victimized by villains – until the lovers are forced to flee, with both the samurai police and the gang in hot pursuit. A misty, moonlit tale from kabuki origins and a stirring classic of Japanese period cinema. Lensed in sumptuous color by pantheon cinematographer Kazuo Miyagawa (who also shot Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and *Yojimbo*). With Eitaro Ozawa.

April 24, 2010

NEW TALE OF ZATOICHI (a.k.a. *Masseur Ichi Enters Again* aka *Shin Zatoichi Monogatari*, 1963, Tokuzo Tanaka, 91 min.) When the visiting Ichi (Shintaro Katsu) plans to marry the sister (Mikiko Tsubouchi) of his sword mentor (Seizaburo Kawazu), the angry teacher bars him from their house. Ichi soon discovers his beloved teacher has changed, embittered by his lack of recognition and success. He rudely rebuffs the blind masseur's promise to give up gambling and carrying a sword and proves he is no longer the man Ichi once knew. Not only is he corrupt, but he may also be responsible for several murders -- which inevitably leads to a tragic, action-packed confrontation between the two blade masters. Actor Seizaburo Kawazu had been a noted leading man since the silent era in Japan. In the late 1950s, he made the transition to being cast as the main villain in countless samurai and yakuza films, from classics like Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961) to cult exploitation favorites like Norifumi Suzuki's *Sex and Fury* (1973). Tokuzo Tanaka directs his initial outing of the Zatoichi series, which was also the first to be filmed in color (numbers 1 & 2, *Tale of Zatoichi* and *The Tale of Zatoichi Continues* were shot in black-and-white).

SWORD OF SEDUCTION (a.k.a. *Kyoshiro Nemuri at Bay* a.k.a. *Sleepy Eyes of Death 4*, Nemuri Kyoshiro Joyoken, 1964, Kazuo Ikehiro, 87 min.) Created by writer Renzaburo Shibata, the half-breed, lone wolf samurai Kyoshiro Nemuri, whose noble mother was raped by a Portuguese missionary-turned-Satanist(!), is one of the great anti-heroes of Japanese film and literature. Raizo Ichikawa was perfect casting, portraying Nemuri with just the right amount of detached misanthropy and reluctant chivalry. Per usual, Nemuri grudgingly gets pulled into the bloody fray, going up against an insane, opium-addicted princess who delights in killing beautiful women and persecuting Christians. He also finds himself encountering a Japanese Christian "nun" (Naoko Kubo) who many believe to be a saint

as well as Chinese martial arts master Chen Sun (Tomisaburo Wakayama, appearing under the pseudonym Kenzaburo Jo), who is in the employ of an evil merchant. Right before *Sword of Seduction*, Daiei Studios was contemplating pulling the plug on the Kyoshiro Nemuri series due to lackluster box office returns. Relatively young director Kazuo Ikehiro, who had worked with Ichikawa several times before, was brought in for this fourth entry. Ikehiro knew his career might be on the line and took some risks to reinvigorate the franchise. He purposely amped up the erotic/grotesque elements that had already been present to a smaller degree in the first 3 films and, inspired by the "Bond girls" phenomenon of the then new 007 films, added in several femmes fatales for Nemuri to encounter while on his quest. The studio heads were delighted with the spike in attendance and gave the green light to more installments. All of the films in this Nemuri series with Ichikawa are good, but *Sword of Seduction* remains one of the best.

May 14, 2010

THE LONE STALKER (Hitori Okami, 1968, Kazuo Ikehiro, 83 min.)

An excellent example of the *matatabi* (samurai gambler) subgenre.

Per usual, director Kazuo Ikehiro displays a surfeit of youthful, kinetic energy that is applied equally to direction of actors, camera movement and editing. The beautiful cinematography by Hiroshi Imai captures beautiful exteriors in different seasons, and there is classic storytelling with flashback vignettes within flashbacks that is reminiscent of a cross between early Sergio Leone and Randolph Scott-era Budd Boetticher. Economic, pared to the bone, but still full of passionate emotion. The beautiful images of nature are not an end in themselves but an unbearably moving backdrop of contrast to one chivalrous individual's descent from naive-young-man-in-love to tragic-vengeance-bent-wanderer. A descent that is precipitated by the subtlest of class barriers and a lovelorn daughter's stubborn parents who are steadfast in determining who will be their son-in-law. It is fascinating to note that the spaghetti western ambience is a definite result of Ikehiro's taste for Italian cinema. *The Lone Stalker* ranks as one of Raizo Ichikawa's all-time best. With Isamu Nagato and Mayumi Ogawa.

THE DEVIL'S TEMPLE (Oni No Sumu Yakata, 1969, Kenji Misumi, 76 min.) Adapted by screenwriter Kaneto Shindo from a story written by Japanese literary giant Junichiro Tanizaki, this very atmospheric saga finds wayward lord-turned-thief Shintaro Katsu sheltering himself in an abandoned temple in the mountainous wilderness outside old Kyoto. There he runs into two very different women: the promiscuous and profane Michiyo Aratama and the quiet, disillusioned Hideko Takamine who is struggling to find life's higher meaning. Soon duplicitous, scheming Aratama seduces Katsu into doing her bidding, and Katsu's already homicidal bloodlust is reawakened whenever anyone approaches the former place of spiritual retreat. Before long a traveling priest (Kei Sato) arrives to make the strange trio a quartet. Holy man Sato's devotion to the Buddha is a challenge to cynical Aratama, and a contest of wills begins that promises to decimate the delicate equilibrium in this den of iniquity. Who will be the victor? And what will be the strange fate of Katsu's haunted killer? Another of director Kenji Misumi's unsung masterpieces with an achingly beautiful score by Akira Ifukube (one of his most memorable, replete with harpsichords and lush string arrangements.)

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