



KAKUSHI TORIDE NO SAN-AKUNIN (THE HIDDEN FORTRESS) is the June, 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library.

Japan 1958 black-and-white live action feature adventure in Japanese with English subtitles  
139 minutes Toho Producers: Masumi Fujimoto and Akira Kurosawa

19 of a possible 20 points

\*\*\*\*\* of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

Key: \*indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

(j) indicates juvenile performer

#### Points

- 2 Direction: Akira Kurosawa\*
  - 2 Editing: Akira Kurosawa\*
  - 2 Cinematography: Kazuo Yamasaki\*
  - 2 Lighting: Ichiro Inohara\*
  - 1 Screenplay: Shinobu Hashimoto, Ryuzo Kikushima, Hideo Oguni, Akira Kurosawa
  - 2 Music: Masaru Sato\*
  - 2 Art Direction: Yoshiro Muraki\* and Kohei Ezaki\*
  - 2 Sound: Fumio Yanoguchi\*
  - 2 Acting
  - 2 Creativity
- 19 total points

Cast: Toshiro Mifune\* (General Rokurota Makabe), Misa Uehara\* (Princess Yukihihime), Takashi Shimura (General Izumi Nagakura), Susumu Fujita\* (General Hyoe Tadokoro), Eiko Miyoshi (Lady-in-Waiting), Minoru Chiaki\* (Tahei, a peasant), Kamatari Fujiwara\* (Matakishi, a peasant), Kamatari Fujiwara\* (Toshiko Higuchi, a slave girl), Kichijiro Ueda (Slaver), Koji Mitsui (Soldier)

A man, a plan, a princess. Add two peasants with a knack for appearing in the wrong place at the wrong time. Result: one comically suspenseful epic adventure.

Kurosawa's KAKUSHI TORIDE NO SAN-AKUNIN (THE HIDDEN FORTRESS) was his nineteenth feature as a director and final production for Toho. Here he employed for the first time a widescreen format. This provided monumental views of plains, mountains, defiles, and a slaughter-on-the-steps sequence overshadowing Eisenstein's Odessa Steps massacre in BRONENOSETS POTEMKIN (THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN). Still in the same epic mode launched by SHICHI-NIN NO SAMURAI

(THE SEVEN SAMURAI), the director slants the story towards black humor, a device he would return to in YOJIMBO (BODYGUARD). Though his star is Toshiro Mifune, this ostensible protagonist is not introduced to the audience until twenty or so minutes of film have elapsed. Like Harry Lime in THE THIRD MAN, General Rokurota Makabe makes a grand postponed entrance, immediately seizing the full attention of viewers. Whether he is hero, villain, or amoral opportunist with alliance to the ethically superior party is left an open question for much of the film. Makabe and the quarrelsome peasants provide the driving force of the plot; their decisions move characters geographically.

As power plays elevate and topple rival clans in sixteenth-century Japan, remnants of a vanquished Akizuki aristocracy hide from Yamana scouts in a predesigned rural fortress. This will be communicated much later in the film, though it precipitates all the action. Instead of starting at the top, Kurosawa launches us at the bottom. This will be no traditional hero tale.

Two lost wandering peasant farmers, amoral cousins to opportunistic villagers of THE SEVEN SAMURAI, wander across a desolate plain. They're dressed in tatters, starving, avaricious, mutually denigrating. Perfect commentators on the absurdity of war.

Hoping to enrich themselves by enlisting with the winning army and fighting against their countrymen, Tahei and Matakishi instead find themselves alternating between burial duty and summary expulsion. Men without either country or principle, they evidence stunning disloyalty to their clan and craven submission to enemy superiors. Tahei and Matakishi are natural slaves who daydream buying their way into aristocracy. Freedom and experience teach them little. Respect, if shown at all, is always elicited by force.

When a horseless samurai appears seeking safety, this pair of outcasts makes no move to assist him. Trembling and exposed, the two gibbering grubbers watch mutely as mounted soldiers gallop up to their isolated enemy, proceeding to slash him to death. Unconcerned about surviving witnesses, Yamana cavalry swing their steeds around and leave corpse and cowards behind in arrogant unconcern.

As soon as they depart, the Akizuki duo debate pros and cons of enriching themselves by stripping their victim. A proposed scheme to don the apparel of an Akizuki warrior is briefly advanced, then abandoned. It doesn't seem advisable while still within range of Yamana troops. Later, attempting a direct crossing of the border with their homeland, the two feckless travelers find themselves barred by hostile patrols. Eventually, when fog lifts, they are seized and enslaved.

An uprising generated spontaneously by starvation and desperation permits the two captives to once again regain freedom. Back in the countryside, Tahei and Matakishi brainstorm an alternative route to their native soil. It will involve sneaking through Yamana itself. For some obscure reason, they expect the northern Yamana frontier to be relatively porous.

While camping in a wilderness region near an unpolluted stream, one of the peasants discovers accidentally that a piece of seemingly worthless wood clicks metallically when pitched aside. Cracking it open, he discovers a metal bar inside. One bearing on its surface the Akizuki clan symbol. Knowing Yamanas will reward anyone who brings them news of missing Akizuki gold, greedy partners convert to miners, testing every likely stick which might harbor treasure.

But they are not alone. From seemingly nowhere emerges a visitor. One who looks like a woodcutter but acts like a commander. Someone utterly enigmatic. Their uninvited company is General Rokurota Makabe. This officer is understandably disguised. Dealing with potentially traitorous riffraff, Rokurota is neither subtle nor communicative. He ensnares his hosts, using as bait hope of obtaining

more auriferous wood in the vicinity. They become carriers and diggers, willing to accept such menial tasks in the hope of discovering more ingots in their spare time.

One day the pair find a second stranger in the neighborhood. It is decidedly female, despite being garbed as a boy. And every bit as disdainful of them as the presumed charcoal burner. Princess Yukihome, sixteen years old and trained in self-defense by a doting father, is a willful tomboy. Despite numerous precautions taken by her loyal surviving general, the princess manages to get herself observed by his discontented work force.

Suddenly future prospects seem more inviting to the laborers. Perhaps there will be an unanticipated side benefit to days of free toil. Not just a reward for recovery of Akizuki treasure, but dalliance with an unaccompanied beautiful young woman as well.

But, no. The general subverts their scheme to play informers and pocket rewards. Then he ferrets out of them a disclosure they hoped to pass incognito through Yamana territory and ultimately slip back into their homeland from the west. Pondering this, Rokurota reaches the conclusion it would be advantageous to himself and his princess to join them. Sooner or later their current hideout will be located by Yamana scouts. But if they have already moved on ...

Meanwhile, mercenary instincts of Tahei and Matakishi are aroused by accidental recovery of a regal comb left behind by the negligent princess they've mistaken for a local peasant girl. The identity of its owner as royalty comes as a welcome shock. Though unable to subdue their quarry, there should be no difficulty in one of them sneaking off to a Yamana outpost and enlightening it about her whereabouts. That would net them a handsome reward.

As usual, they underestimate the wit and foresight of their supervisor. Rokurota short-circuits anticipated escape, then discourages them further by telling them the princess is dead, as Yamanas already know. For Rokurota has prevailed upon his younger sister, a girl the same age as Princess Yukihome, to pose as her liege. Kofuyu's self-sacrifice opens the path to salvation and freedom for the real princess and her guardian. It solves one problem. The troublesome drifters unwittingly eliminate a second. Rokurota approves of the roundabout route envisioned by them for their own security, but incorporates it into his master plan. He and the princess shall join them.

Another safeguard is put into operation. The princess must pretend to be mute, so her speech does not betray family or native region. Silence has the additional merit of forestalling criticism, contradiction, or imperious overrides. It also helps preserve the deception that Princess Yukihome is dead. Dead girls neither talk nor walk.

During the course of various adventures, Rokurota acquires an additional travelling companion when the princess takes pity on an enslaved Akizuki girl she finds mistreated in a Yamana inn. After entreaty and implied order, the general buys freedom for this slave. She becomes not just a comrade, but an ally, guarding the Princess against internal traitors as well as external foes.

A frantic dash to dispatch potential tattletales leads Rokurota at one point to the encampment of respected opponent General Hyoe Tadokoro, who is serving in the Yamana forces. They agree to a private combat. That results in humiliating defeat for Tadokoro. Still, the seemingly pitiless Rokurota allows him to retain his life. That act of mercy will have huge later repercussions.

Will the vastly outnumbered Akizukis reach safety? Is there any reward for turncoat peasants? What becomes of the gold? Watch the film and find out.

Every technical aspect of the film is superbly crafted. With one glaring exception. The screenplay is no more profound than the plot, though it does examine superficially honor, mercy, and forgiveness. By couching so much dialogue in uninspired inflections of two bumbling bumpkins, Kurosawa and his writing associates eliminate the possibility of any genuine debate. However, this failing is offset by vigorous editing which includes numerous wipes, consistently precise calibrations of sound recording, cinematography fully realizing the horizontal sweep of a widescreen format, and expert choreography of battle scenes and fire festival ritual.

Though no actor or actress is less than exemplary, special commendation must go to Toshiro Mifune as the deviously faithful Makabe and to Misa Uehara for her vivid portrayal of a feisty adolescent prematurely tossed into a battle for survival. Her character displays courage, regret, imperiousness, wrath, teasing, intelligence, restraint, and willfulness. With equal credibility and power across that vast emotional range. Nor should Toshiko Higuchi's largely nonverbal performance be overlooked. As an enslaved captive whose plight unlocks the charity of her sovereign, Higuchi marshals attention whenever onscreen, holding her own against screen veterans while making each intimate scene she appears in memorable.

Due to graphic violence, obscene language, and considerable dollops of cynicism, THE HIDDEN FORTRESS is unsuitable viewing for anyone under the age of 18. For older teens and adults, it's a delightfully astonishing visual treat and most highly recommended.

The Criterion dvd release includes subtitles, chapter index, and a trailer.