



THE SEVEN SAMURAI is the LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library for October, 2013.

SHICHININ NO SAMURAI (THE SEVEN SAMURAI) Japan 1954 subtitled black-and-white live action feature drama 207 minutes Producer: Shojiro Motoki Toho Co. Ltd.

18 of a possible 20 points

****1/2 of a possible *****

*indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

Points

- 2 Direction: Akira Kurosawa*
- 2 Editing: Akira Kurosawa*
- 2 Cinematography: Asakazu Nakai*
- 2 Lighting: Shigero Mori*
- 1 Screenplay: Shinobu Hashimoto, Hideo Oguni and Akira Kurosawa
- 1 Music: Fumio Hayasaka
- 2 Art Direction: So Matsuyama*
Art Consultants: Seison Maeda and Kohei Ezaki
- 2 Sound Recording: Fumio Yanaguchi*
- 2 Cast: Takashi Shimura* (Kambei, samurai leader), Toshiro Mifune* (Kikuchiyo), Yoshio Inaba* (Gorobei, a master samurai), Seiji Miyaguchi* (Kyuzo, master swordsman samurai), Minoru Chiaki *(Heihachi, banner-creating samurai), Daisuke Kato* (Shichiroji, a samurai who is an old comrade of Kambei), Ko Kimura* (Katsushiro, apprentice samurai), Kamatari Fujiwara* (Manzo, a samurai-hating farmer and father of Shino),

Kuninori Kodo (Gisaku, miller and village patriarch), Bokuzen Hidari* (elderly awkward farmer), Yoshio Kosugi (Mosuke, farmer who owns one of the three outlying village huts), Yoshio Tsuchiya* (Rikichi, farmer whose wife has been kidnapped by bandits), Keiji Sakakida (Gosaku, a farmer), Keiko Tsushima* (Shino, Manzo's daughter), Toranosuke Ogawa* (Grandfather of kidnapped child), Yu Akitsu (father of kidnapped child), Noriko Sengoku* (mother of kidnapped child), Gen Shimizu* (masterless samurai), Jun Tatari (talkative coolie), Atsushi Watanabe* (bun vendor), Sojin Kamiyama (blind minstrel), Jiro Kumagai, Haruko Toyama, Tsuneo Katagiri and Yasuhisa Tsutsumi (four farmers), Yu Akitsu (a husband), Noriko Sengoku (a wife), Kichijiro Ueda, Akira Tani, Haruo Nakajima, Takashi Narita, Senkichi Omura, Shuno Takahara and Masanobu Okubo (seven bandits) Yukiko Shimazaki (Rikichi's wife), Shimpei Takagi (bandit chief), Shin Otomo (bandit second-in-command), Toshio Takahara (bandit with musket), Haneko Toyama* (Gisaku's daughter-in-law), Eijiro Tono (thief who kidnaps child), Takuzo Kumagaya (Gisaku's son), Hiroshi Hayashi (weak ronin), Ichiro Chiba (Buddhist priest), Tsuruko Mano, Matsue Ono, Tazue Ichimanji, Masako Oshiro, Kyoko Ozawa, Michiko Kadono, Toshiko Nakano, Shozuko Azuma, Keiko Mori, Michiko Kawabe, Yuko Togawa, Yayoko Kitano, Misao Suyama, Toriko Takahara (fourteen women farmers)

2 Creativity

Fencing Direction: Yoshio Sugino

Archery Direction: Ienori Kaneko and Shigeru Endo

Folklore Research: Kohei Ezaki

18 total points

THE SEVEN SAMURAI was director Akira Kurosawa's fifteenth film and his seventh collaboration with actor Toshiro Mifune. Perhaps the latter detail provided the number portion of its title.

Declaring traditional jidai-geki (period costume drama) was lifeless, Kurosawa set out to create a streamlined, earthy substitute that would recapture the

kineticism and authenticity of earlier feudal epics. His editing models would be the American western, particularly John Ford's MY DARLING CLEMENTINE with its final showdown at the O.K. Corral, and Dreyer's LA PASSION DE JEANNE D'ARC, a gallery of memorable close-ups. Kurosawa would borrow from Frank Capra's RAIN OR SHINE the concept of torrential rain and its impact on locomotion. To the chagrin of Toho studio producers, he postponed shooting the climactic battle of THE SEVEN SAMURAI until weather provided sufficient mud and precipitation to simulate the onscreen conditions pioneered by Capra. From Kenji Mizoguchi came the notion of continuous flowing film rhythm, achieved here by jump cuts, wipes, and axial cuts rapidly reducing viewer distance from characters. Running is favored over walking. Travelling shots are frequently minimized to just departure and arrival scenes. Combat episodes play out in seconds rather than minutes. A precipitous quality of forward momentum counters the nearly three and one-half hour duration of Kurosawa's drama.

But just as important as editing are five other fundamental elements of this film: cinematography, acting, sound, lighting and production design.

Asakazu Nakai served as cinematographer, working with a three-camera shooting system and a telescopic lens option. The triple camera set-up was a first for Kurosawa. He esteemed its results so highly that all his subsequent films were photographed in the same manner, leading to both inflated film stock cost and a superabundance of coverage shots for editing purposes.

Multiple cameras provided smooth transitions in difficult progressions. One such is that which begins at a waterfall and ends with the death of Heihachi. Kikuchiyo's drunken pursuit of tormentors at the coolies' lodging is another.

In the rain attack scenes, use of the telescopic lens allows for more direct audience participation. Scenes such as Kikuchiyo's inexorable assault on the bandit chief after being shot by his musket and a galloping horse's loss of footing and subsequent fall in mud give viewers center row seats for spectacular combat action.

From a long shot of outlaws on horseback cresting a ridge overlooking an anonymous village to the final scene of three surviving samurai dwarfed by four graves of fallen comrades, Nakai's cameras probe hamlet and characters with relentless intensity. Extreme closeups have seldom been so effective as the shot

where a widowed, almost impossibly wrinkled old woman separates from a mob of peasants to wreak revenge on a captured bandit. Another searing exponential magnification is the shot in which Rikichi, a farmer whose wife has been carried off by pillagers, proposes villagers should kill all the freebooters themselves. His blazing eyes and straining facial muscles seem on the verge of leaping off the screen.

Superior performances abound. Possibly most memorable is Yoshio Tsuchiya's as Rikichi, aflame for vengeance against marauders. Also notable are Takashi Shimura's meditative Kambei, leader of the samurai and master strategist, and Minoru Chiaki's amiably self-deprecating ronin (an unemployed wandering samurai) whose humor and compassion are treasured by both warriors and peasants. Yukiko Shimazaki is stunning as Rikichi's wife, a woman who would rather die than return to her husband. She accomplishes wordlessly what Mifune, great as he is, cannot do with dozens of speeches: make a complicated conflicted character genuinely credible.

For one great deficiency of the film is its resort to operatic overacting. This repellent trait is most evident in the mugging of Kikuchiyo, whose appropriated name translates humorously as "Chrysanthemum of a Thousand Generations." Mifune portrays him first as a childish blustering buffoon similar to the strutting Napoloni of Chaplin's *THE GREAT DICTATOR*. When he's handed a wailing infant by a speared farmer's wife, Kikuchiyo transforms into serious philosopher, identifying with all orphans left adrift in the world by adult violence. His comic bravado is merely a mask to disguise vulnerability dating from childhood trauma. The problem is that when Mifune postures as a swaggering samurai, it appears all too clearly he's playing a role, not living one. By the time Kikuchiyo's underlying search for respectability surfaces, the character has rooted himself too deeply in excessive expressionism to recover authentic gravitas. A joy to watch, Kikuchiyo is impossible to accept as a real human being.

Likewise, problem-solving conferences degenerate quickly into grotesque screamfests, more suited to a horror film. A consequence is repulsion of potential Western screeners who see only undisciplined scenery-chewing in such outbursts.

Offsetting these escapees from Noh theater are more restrained performances. Noriko Sengoku, as mother of a child held hostage by a

desperate robber, times a brief pause to adjust positions of rice cakes on a platter perfectly. Yoshio Inaba's archery expertise is matched by a discreet economy of character mobility. Seiji Miyaguchi's contrasting modes of silent stillness and lightning aggression create the ultimate disciplined combatant, a solitary perfectionist both insulated and isolated in an inner world of perpetual readiness for conflict resolution.

Fumio Yanoguchi offers soundscapes of artificial resonance which, abetted by repetitive percussion, stamp themselves into lasting memories. Hoofbeats, running footsteps, wind skimming through grain fields, continuous creaking of a watermill wheel, Heihachi's banner flapping with uneven snaps atop a village hut --- all these are recorded and artistically amplified to optimal impact. Speech patterns are similarly edited by Kurosawa himself into conformity with dynamic visuals. This results in matching grunts, barks, drawls, stammers, ejaculations and snarls with accompanying flashes, closeups, wipes, jump cuts and telescoping. The variability of tempi suggests a Bartok dance suite, with clearly defined groupings streaming smoothly from each metric scheme into an adjacent partner.

Shigeru Mori, lighting cameraman, supplies optimal clarity throughout the entire film, relying heavily on deep focus and intense illumination. Many scenes operate on three planes: primary, secondary and tertiary. Usually films only present two: foreground and background. But this one is so swarmingly detailed that secondary and tertiary planes are often just as active as the primary one, therefore requiring full lighting.

Consider Shot 100, the scene in which Kambei finishes dressing himself as a Buddhist priest. It's a medium close-up, but crammed with people. Twelve faces of spectators can be distinctly seen watching the unorthodox samurai. These form the tertiary plane, grouped rather like a Greek chorus, though at this point it is mute. In this region can be spotted young samurai hopeful Katsushiro spearheading four scouts from a jeopardized village. Mifune's Kikuchiyo is in the middle plane, squatting a bit left of center, obviously also intrigued by the counterfeit holy man but not part of the communal gathering behind him. In the primary plane Kambei at the right side and a real Buddhist priest at the left wedge apparently diminutive Kikuchiyo between their shoulders. Viewers are compelled to focus attention sequentially on three different character blocks, all within the

same composition. Further complexity is clustering of a subgroup inside the third plane: four expeditionary villagers and Katsushiro form a diagonal flank tilting left. They contrast with the larger crowd of observers whose diagonal leans right. None of this ordering is random.

To establish authenticity, Kurosawa and art director So Matsuyama planned construction of a small community on the sparsely populated Izu peninsula. Using detailed historical drawings as guides, the agricultural freehold featured in the film was created and suitably aged, processes Kurosawa zealously supervised with critical diligence. An overview map was drawn and periodically displayed in the film itself. Several historical consultants gave expert advice about archery and fencing, folklore, period armor, Sengoku era fashions and rural architecture. Since Kurosawa came from samurai stock, he already knew quite a bit about their customs. But intensive readings of Japanese histories shed even more light on bushido practices and philosophy, leading to a most credible enactment of the warrior's way on screen.

This thoroughness of research applied also to makeup and costuming. One look at grimy faces and tattered garb of farm children trailing Kikuchiyo reveals fastidious attentiveness to textile selection, fabric distressing and skin coloring applications. Similar precision was employed in selecting prop swords and muskets, saddles, helmets and even rice containers. Every property had to be functional as well as decorative.

The team screenplay devised by Akira Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto and Hideo Oguni is intricate and idiomatic, peppered with subplots all ultimately resolved. There's no attempt to employ archaic terminology. Rather, contemporary slang is substituted, yielding a profitable dividend in audience speed of comprehension. Romance is interwoven with defense tactics, revenge schemes, competitive cheerleading, violent assaults, comic banter, intermittent philosophizing and funeral rites. A whole range of social strata are tossed into turbulent conflict, with the final outcome a musical celebration, not the customary ride off into the twilight.

Fumio Hayasaka's music mirrors character action, proving to be more utilitarian than enchanting or timeless. Mifune's drolly presumptuous character is underlined by a mambo, neither Japanese nor appropriate to the era depicted. He

is most closely affiliated with the bassoon, recalling Grandfather in PETER AND THE WOLF, though that probably isn't what either Hayasaka or Kurosawa intended. Drums signal the presence of menace, hardly an original pairing. Flute and bells are reserved mainly for farmers, though they could just as easily be cues for priests, perhaps even more justifiably. Most frequently nothing more than ominous percussive noodlings, Hayasaka's score attains a higher level during the festive planting song and choreography that follow a blackout after rider attack number three. These are truly inspired, rooted solidly in folk tradition.

Hyperkinetic, complex, an explosive mix of character study and action extravaganza, THE SEVEN SAMURAI contains some of the most widely imitated and cherished battle scenes in all of cinema. But within its reels can also be found slapstick humor, masterpieces of scene construction and ensemble blocking, tender courtship, fraternal bonding, and toxic, paralyzing cynicism. As a showcase of costume drama with contemporary relevance and an exposition of communal solidarity overcoming organized looting and bullying, Kurosawa's masterwork richly rewards viewers. It does not quite attain the depth of HIGH AND LOW. Missing is IKIRU!'s compassion, RAN's tragic grandeur, the restorative closure of THE HIDDEN FORTRESS, NO REGRETS FOR OUR YOUTH's inspiring delineation of blossoming social responsibility in a spoiled adolescent. But as an adventure saga resuscitating a bygone epoch and peopling it with vibrant, emotionally charged personalities, THE SEVEN SAMURAI has few peers. Definitely a film to see, analyze, discuss and revisit.

This Criterion dvd release of THE SEVEN SAMURAI includes a detailed audio commentary by Michael Jeck which provides considerable insight into Kurosawa's editing process, guidance of actors and perfectionism. Other special features are subtitles and scene selections.

THE SEVEN SAMURAI is suitable for adults only due to mature themes and substantial violence.