



***Sansho Dayu (Sansho the Bailiff)* is an October, 2024 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Library of the Heritage Methodist Church. Below is Kino Ken's review of that Criterion Collection dvd release.**

16 of a possible 20 points ** = a minor classic**

**Japan 1954 black-and-white 124 minutes subtitled live action feature drama
Restored Version Daiei Studios Producer: Masaichi Nagata
a Criterion Collection dvd release**

**Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

Points:

- 2 Direction: Kenji Mizoguchi**
- 1 Editing: Mitsuzo Miyata**
- 2 Cinematography: Kazuo Miyagawa***
Stills Photography: En'nosuke Asada*
- 2 Lighting: Kenichi Okamoto* and Yasuo Iwamoto***
- 1 Screenplay: Fuji Yabiro and Yoshikata Yodo from the story by Ogai Mori**
- 1 Music: Fumio Hayasaka, Kinshichi Kodera, and Tamekichi Mochizuki**
- 2 Production Design: Hisakazu Tsuji***

Art Direction: Kisaku Ito* and Kozaburo Nakajima*

Set Design: Uichirô Yamamoto*

Background Design: Tasaburô Oota

Set Decoration: Yuichiro Yamamoto

Costume Design: Shima Yoshizane*

Costume Researcher: Yoshio Ueno

Makeup: Masanori Kobayashi

2 Sound: Iwao Otani*

1 Acting

2 Creativity

16 total points

Cast: Kinuyo Tanaka* (Tamaki / Nakagimi), Yoshiaki Hanayagi (mature Yushio / Mutsu-Waka), Kyoko Kagawa* (Teenage Anju / Shinobu), Masao Shimizu (Taira Masauji), Eitaro Shindo* (Sansho Dayu = Bailiff Sansho), Akitake Kono* (Taro, Sansho's son), Rosuke Kagawa (Donmo), Ken Mitsuda* (Fujiwara), Shozo Nanbu* (Taira Masasue), Chieko Naniwa (Ubatake), Bontaro Miake (Kichiji), Saburo Date (Kinpei), Akira Shimizu (slave trader), Ichiro Sugai (Nio, an old escapee), Kimiko Tachibana (Namiji), Yoko Kozono (Kohagi), Kanji Koshiba (Naito Kaikudo), Kikue Mori (Shinto Priestess), Yukio Horikita (Jiro of Sado Island), Hachiro Okuni (Saburo Miyazaki), Teruko Omi* ("New", young Nakagimi), Naoki Fujima (j) (Zushio as a young boy), Masahiko Kato (j) (Zushio as a tween), Keiko Enami (j) (Anju as a child), Ryôsuke Kagawa (Ritsushi Kumotake), Shinobu Araki (Sadaya), Reiko Kongô (Shiono), Ryônusuke Azuma (landlord), Sumao Ishihara (Yakko), Jun Fujikawa (Kanamaru), Akiyoshi Kikuno and Gogo Nakanishi (guards), Sôji Shibata* (Sado Island man), Sachiko Sôma (Sugano), others

A masterpiece from the Golden Age of Japanese cinema (1949-1965), *Sansho Dayu* is an excellent introduction to the work of film director Kenji Mizoguchi. Though Mizoguchi helmed eighty-six feature films, only thirty-five survive. The best of those remaining seem to come from two periods: 1928-1939 and 1950-1956. Produced in 1954, *Sansho the Bailiff* emerged from the second of these. It focused on a legendary account of how slavery came to

be abolished in Tango province during the Heian period of Japanese history (794-1185 C.E.). Detailed information about the events screened here is unavailable. So this drama mixes legend and myth. It's based partly on a story by Ogai Mori, partly on a mythological folk tale from an anonymous source which was transcribed in the early 1930s by anthropologist Nagao Takeuchi. Mizoguchi's screenwriting duo of Fuji Yahiro and Yoshikata Yoda freely drew from both sources.

Apparently producer Masaichi Nagata wanted primary focus to be on two young siblings, Zushio and Anju. What director Mizoguchi had in mind was a critique of feudalism and any system eliminating pity and sympathy from human relationships. The ultimate compromise, which probably completely satisfied neither party, was to concentrate chiefly in the first half of the film on separation of mother from children and devote the second half to reunion of parent and son. A secondary conflict between Zushio and bailiff Sansho served as a plot complication obstructing the former's plans. Both the issue of enslavement and theme of mercy wound up being pushed into the background, overshadowed by climactic mother and child reunion.

Mizoguchi's eighty-first feature film nonetheless emerged triumphantly as compelling drama, thanks to extensive researching of costumes and period customs, absorbingly sympathetic performances by Kyoko Kagawa as the older Anju and Kinuyo Tanaka as Anju's mother Tamaki, a formidably violent and callous villain, and arresting gradations of lighting. What might have been mere predictable sentimental melodrama was transformed effectively into far more potent material through their combined achievements.

The story line ultimately used by director Mizoguchi begins *in media res* as Tamaki, a maidservant, and Tamaki's two children traverse Japan in an attempt to rejoin Tamaki's exiled spouse, Taira no Masauji. A flashback clarifies the reason for Masauji's banishment: he is too lenient with peasant dependents, thus depriving their overlord in Kyoto of tax money.

As evening approaches, Tamaki's group is accosted by a Shinto priestess who pretends to kindly provide them with illegal nocturnal shelter. She will get them boat passage the next morning so they can evade dangerous bandits lurking in mountains that must otherwise be crossed without protective guardians.

In reality, this treacherous hostess turns the quartet over to a pair of greedy boatmen who separate adults from children and travel in opposing directions.

Doing the customary honorable thing in such a circumstance, menial Ubatake steps out of her boat and drowns herself. Tamaki's attempt to follow suit is stymied by Jiro no Sado, who has a more remunerative plan of action for her.

Saburo of Miyazaki, in the other boat, rows the children away to a slave market. Finding no buyers at his first landing, he continues onward, meeting indifference and failure repeatedly until a stranger advises him to try the harbor of Yura in Tango province. Sansho is a wealthy landlord there. He has a reputation for shelling out money for undocumented outcasts in any physical condition who would still be able to work.

Sure enough, Saburo obtains recompense for his merchandise from Sansho's agent when he reaches Yura. He unloads the cargo of two preteen children with great satisfaction, leaving it to ungentle mercies of a disdainful purchaser.

While Zushio and Anju are compelled to perform peasant labor without pay for Sansho at Ishiura in Tango, their mother is taken by Jiro to the island of Sado, some two hundred forty-six miles away. She doesn't expect to ever see her children again. For how could they travel the intervening distance safely alone?

Once on Sado, Tamaki is sold to a house of prostitution. When she attempts to escape, her tendons are cut, a gruesome action suggested but not shown onscreen.

Similarly, branding of a recaptured runaway at Ishiura is also left to the audience's imagination.

A number of years pass with no change in situation for Anju and Zushio. The latter yields to cynicism, becoming a submissive tool of Sansho's cruelty. Anju, however, remains the compassionate child her father had willed her to be. Observing her brother's reversion to savagery, she resolves to create an escape plan for him, sacrificing herself so the family line can be preserved.

At this point, Mizoguchi's determination to show Zushio's transformation from pessimistic fatalist into Mr. Benevolence becomes apparent as the young man accepts Anju's charge to carry away a diseased former protector on his back in spite of that encumbrance's retarding his flight and diminishing chances of its success.

Zushio and his burden, Namiji, reach sanctuary at a temple in Nakayama without being caught by pursuers. When Sansho's minions arrive, they're looking really only for the young man, uninterested in the fate of Namiji, whose

usefulness as a laborer is now near zero. But their prey has been hidden in a huge chest which they overlook in their futile search. Furthermore, the temple priest sends them off deliberately in the wrong direction. For he is Jiro, kind-hearted elder son of Sansho, who has become a Buddhist priest rather than inherit his father's position as brutal slave master. Presumably, neither younger brother Saburo nor any of the peasants in Sansho's pursuit squad from Ishiura recognize him.

Disguised as a mendicant Buddhist priest and carrying a letter of recommendation from Jiro, Zushio makes his way to Kyoto, where he hopes to present a petition to Taira Masasue, the prime minister, asking for an official pardon of Masauji and his reinstatement to a former position. His desperate, protocol-defying entreaties are utterly ignored until the supplicant thrusts at Masasue his most treasured keepsake, an image of the goddess Kwannon the Merciful. Though apparently indifferent at the time, upon later inspection of the amulet Masasue realizes the truth of what Zushio was frantically declaring in public. He then arranges a private interview with him. Recognizing the injustice of indignities suffered by Masauji's offspring, the official arranges for restoration of Zushio to noble rank under the name of Masamichi. Under this new identity, the young man should serve as governor of Tango.

When Masamichi shares his plan to outlaw slavery in Tango, Masasue is appalled. He counsels against such a step, as it would trespass into the Minister of the Right's privileges. Sansho was simply that officer's factor, albeit a highly rewarding one.

Masasue also informs Zushio of his father's death, citing that as making recovery of his former office impossible.

Masamichi remains adamant about destroying Sansho's dictatorship. So after visiting his father's burial place, he officially announces the abolition of slavery in Tango. Sansho and his hired thugs counter that by destroying all public notices of Masamichi's proclamation, leading to the tyrant's direct personal confrontation with a former despised slave. The new governor has his nemesis arrested, but this action is offset when the youth belatedly learns of Anju's self-sacrifice after his escape. His liberation decree comes too late to benefit her. Grief-stricken, the novice governor then resigns his post and sets off to Sado where he hopes to find his mother still alive.

There, after twice being misinformed that Tamaki has died, Zushio finds her. She's now blind, crippled, and gray-haired, serving as a human scarecrow while singing a lullaby of grief he encountered before as a peasant in Sansho's village. Trying to reintroduce himself, the wayfarer is frustrated by Tamaki's insistence he's only a ghost of Zushio, not her actual son. Only when he presses the Kwannon amulet into her hands does she realize the voice asking for forgiveness is that of a long absent child.

Sound and lighting are optimal in this restored version of Mizoguchi's classic. Criterion has provided as a supplement to the film an eighty-page booklet which includes cast and credits information, an essay by Mark LeFanu titled "The Lessons of *Sansho*," an English translation by J. Thomas Rimer of Ogai Mori's short story "Sansho the Steward," and an English translation of the anonymous Japanese folktale "An Account of the Life of the Deity of Mount Iwaki" by Susan Matisoff and Jeffrey Angles. Further bonuses of this dvd release are an audio commentary by Jeffrey Angles, a twenty-four minute video interview with film critic Tadao Sato, a ten-minute video interview with actress Kyoko Kagawa (who played the older Anju), and a fifteen-minute video interview with the film's first assistant director, Tokuzo Tanaka. The Kagawa short is particularly interesting as it highlights the director's method of "preparing" his performers for their roles by continuously asking them for "reflection" about their characters.

Highly recommended for teens and adults, *Sansho Dayu*'s content is too brutal at times for preteens.

Don't miss any opportunity to acquaint yourself with one of the classics of world cinema!