



Here's Kino Ken's review of Akira Kurosawa's *Donzoko* (*The Lower Depths*), a Criterion dvd release.

13 of a possible 20 points = ***1/2 = above-average film

Japan 1957 black-and-white 125 minutes subtitled live action feature drama
Toho Company, Ltd. Producers: Shojiro Motoki, Tomoyuki Tanaka, and Akira Kurosawa

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 2 Direction: Akira Kurosawa*
- 0 Editing: Akira Kurosawa
- 2 Cinematography: Kazuo Yamasaki*
Still Photography: Masao Fukuda*
- 2 Lighting: Shigeni Mori
- 0 Screenplay: Hideo Oguni and Akira Kurosawa based on the play
by Maxim Gorky
Script Supervision: Teruyo Nogami
- 1 Music: Masaru Satō
- 2 Art Direction: Yoshiro Muraki*
Costume Design: Yoshiko Samejima*
- 2 Sound: Fumio Yanoguchi*

Sound Effects: Ichiro Minawa*

2 Acting

0 Creativity

13 total points

further

Cast: Toshiro Mifune (Sutekichi the thief), Isuzu Yamada* (Osugi the landlady), Kyoko Kagawa* (Okayo, Osugi's younger sister), Ganjiro Nakamura* (Rokubei, Osugi's landlord husband), Koji Mitsui* (Yoshisaburo the gambler), Kamatari Fujiwara* (the actor), Akemi Negishi* (Osen the prostitute), Minoru Chiaki (the ex-samurai), Nijiko Kiyokawa (Otaki, a candy vendor), Eijiro Tono (Tomekichi the tinker), Eiko Miyoshi (Asa, Tomekichi's wife), Kichijiro Ueda (the police agent), Haruo Tanaka (Tatsu), Bokuzen Hidari* (Kahei the pilgrim), Fujitayama (a porter with the build of a sumo wrestler), Atsushi Watanabe (another porter), Kamayuki Tsubono (a tradesman)

One of director Akira Kurosawa's minor films, this adaptation of a Maxim Gorky Russian play for some reason discards the original author's concern for an oppressed proletariat and turns proceedings instead into cynical comedy. Lacking any centering character for authorial spokesperson or audience identification and further burdened with a depressing conclusion, *Donzoko* (*The Lower Depths*) is a kind of acting master class in search of a theme.

Resetting the play's locale from nineteenth-century Russia to Edo period (1840s) Japan involved more than simply an alteration in geography. Gorky's Russian Orthodox pilgrim is replaced with an itinerant Buddhist monk, an aristocratic baron turns into a shameless ex-Ronin, and, worse still, the playwright's literate, novel-reading prostitute dissolves into a mere illiterate dreamer. Gone is the call for upgrading and cleaning out slum environments. In its place is an Ozu-style resignation to workings of Destiny. This ill harmonizes with Kurosawa's more typical trumpeting for active struggle against injustice. Most typical of resultant tension is actor Toshiro Mifune's agonizing attempts to make the reform-minded thief into a sympathetic hero. Both screenplay and direction defeat them, tamping Sutekichi's character down instead to the level of a fickle opportunist unlikely to ever save himself or anyone else from poverty and despair.

The plot concerns an assortment of derelicts and three slightly better-accommodated people of property living in a tenement largely neglected by the outside world.

Spouses Osugi and Rokubei own the ramshackle shelter populated by thief Sutekichi, tinker Tomekichi, candy-seller Otaki, consumptive Asa, prostitute Osen, an ex-actor, cooper Tatsu, a cynical ex-samurai, and gambler Yoshisaburo. Okayo, younger sister to Osugi, lives with her brother-in-law and sibling in an adjacent house.

Part One of the film and play introduces audiences to each of these personalities and limns a bit of their back stories. The thief has been attempting to raise his financial status by pulling down that of better-heeled individuals. Tomekichi prides himself on being a craftsman. But his products don't seem to ever be complete or saleable. Osen lives a double life, satisfying her desire for productivity by imagining herself to be a romantic heroine, sort of a Cinderella awaiting the arrival of her Prince Charming. Yoshisaburo is so cynical about life he has lost all feeling for anyone else's troubles, this being revealed most blatantly in the film's final line. Asa pins her hopes on Eternity and Heaven, the abuse and disease ravaging her on Earth being hopefully more transient than happiness in the World Beyond. Tatsu, a man luckless in both employment and marriage, leads an embittered existence defending his own shriveled spirit by continual denigration of neighbors. Otaki pursues a more moderate course, sharing some of the little food she possesses with a dying woman and bantering with other denizens of the tenement in a good-humored way. She will eventually marry the police agent, guaranteeing freedom from harassment by state authorities. The actor, plagued by alcoholism and failing memory, lives mainly in the past. His future aspiration is to recover glory days of his youth. Not a promising blueprint for future success.

What triggers drama is arrival of Kahei, a wandering Buddhist priest traveling without passport or money. He temporarily takes up residence with the local indigents, feeding their illusions, by providing affirmation and consolation, suggesting they can create private realities through cherishing their dreams and overlooking their miseries. Yet he's powerless to prevent envious Osugi from beating her more beautiful younger sister, or to forestall what turns out to be fatal combat between Sutekichi and Rokubei. Soon after Asa's death, he himself takes a departure.

Following Rokubei's murder, his sister-in-law Okayo vanishes in a manner reminiscent of similar disappearances by key cast members in Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* and Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

One reason this Kurosawa film fails to deeply involve non-Japanese audiences is intrusion of specifically Japanese dance and music into its narrative. These possess no interpretive value for Westerners, distancing them unprofitably from what is happening on screen.

A second annoyance is found in *Donzoko*'s screenplay, which multiplies obscenities and profanities far beyond what is dramatically necessary to indicate lower-class speech. Such overabundance of vulgarity quickly sheds any shock value it might otherwise contain. It serves lamentably as yet another distraction from key themes Gorky was pursuing. Namely, a necessity of illusion for mental health and the therapeutic role of "beautiful lies" in permitting hope to live amid squalor and impoverishment.

Positive achievements in *Donzoko* include Kurosawa's near-total perfection in directing his actors to develop characters more thoroughly than usual in cinema or on stage. Especially rewarding are performances by Isuzu Yamada as the violently adulterous and jealous Osugi, Koji Mitsui's astutely pessimistic gambler, Kamatari Fujiwara's sad sack ex-actor, Bokuzen Hidari's mediating monk – who proves adroitly evasive in the clutch, Akemi Negishi's pathetically romanticizing prostitute, and Kyoko Kagawa's greatly persecuted Okayo, whose misreading of Rokubei's accidental demise turns her from victim to prosecutor in her triumphant first assignment from Kurosawa.

Cinematography works brilliantly to open up what could have been a smothering, compressed slice-of-life melodrama, freeing it from exaggerations of staginess. Compositions are framed meticulously, reminiscent of Renoir's finest work, using deep-focus photography to riveting effect. By utilizing three cameras simultaneously Kurosawa gave himself plenty of alternative angles to work with in the editing room. Unfortunately, he was much less discreet about inconsequential dialogue and over-reliance on blackout editing. These and slow dissolves retarded pacing considerably. Eschewing wipes, which would have streamlined action advantageously, he instead resorted to delaying tactics, for no aesthetic gain whatsoever.

Sound and lighting are executed with utmost precision to detail, resulting in an overlay of reality buttressing the naturalistic script created by Hideo Oguni

and Akira Kurosawa. Their periodic insertions of humor are quite welcome in an otherwise very bleak production.

Perhaps most distinguished of all *The Lower Depths* film elements is the set design of art director Yoshiro Muraki, which took weeks to accomplish and looks it. Yoshiko Samejima's costume designs, suitably aged and tattered, further add to the effectiveness of *Donzoko* in making the onscreen environment tacky and dingy.

By reason of its conflicted moral statements, prolific vulgar language, and thoroughly adult situations, *Donzoko* is completely unsuitable for any but adult audiences. Even for those, it's a chilly, downbeat excursion offering much more art than entertainment. Be warned.