



***Hakuchi (The Idiot)* is a 1951 Akira Kurosawa film adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel. Below is Kino Ken's review of its Criterion Eclipse Series dvd release. This is a current LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stouppe Library of the Heritage Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania.**

**19 of a possible 20 points = \*\*\*\*\* = a major classic**

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

**Japan 1951 black-and-white 166 minutes subtitled live action feature drama  
Shochiku Company Ltd. Producer: Takashi Koide Criterion Collection dvd**

**Points:**

- 2 Direction: Akira Kurosawa\***
- 2 Editing: Shochiku anonymous staff**
- 2 Cinematography: Toshio Ubukata\***
- 2 Lighting: Akio Tamura**
- 2 Screenplay: Eijirō Hisaita and Akira Kurosawa based on the novel by  
Fyodor Dostoevsky**
- 1 Music: Fumio Hayasaka, (Edvard Grieg, Modest Mussorgsky)**
- 2 Production Design: Takashi Matsuyama\***  
**Set Decoration: Ushitarō Shimada\***

**Settings: Genzō Komiya\* and Shohei Sekine\***

**2 Sound: Yoshisaburo Imo**

**2 Acting**

**2 Creativity**

**19 total points**

**Cast: Setsuko Hara\* (Taeko Nasu), Masayuki Mori\* (Kinji Kameda), Toshirō Mifune\* (Denkichi Akama), Yoshiko Kuga\* (Ayako), Takashi Shimura\* (Ono, Ayako's father), Chieko Higashiyama\* (Satoko, Ayako's mother), Eijirō Yanagi (Tohata), Minoru Chiaki (Mutsuo Kayama, the secretary), Noriko Sengoku (Takako), Kokuten Kōdō (Jumpei), Bokuzen Hidari (Karube), Eiko Miyoshi (Madame Kayama), Chiyoko Fumiya\* (Noriko), Mitsuyo Akashi\* (Madame Akama), Daisuke Inoue (j)\* (Kaoru), others**

***Hakuchi (The Idiot)* was Akira Kurosawa's follow-up film to *Rashomon*. It was also his most ambitious film yet, utilizing as backdrop snowbound Hokkaido, a stand-in for wintry Russia.**

**A Japanese soldier who narrowly escaped death by firing squad is sent from a hospital in Okinawa back to home territory in Hokkaido. Kinji Kameda had been mistaken for someone else, resulting in a terrifying last-minute execution reprieve. Watching another young man meet death quaveringly in such a manner and expecting to follow his example momentarily, he himself crossed the line from sanity to lunacy. That was the cause of his commitment to a hospital.**

**Not really cured of recurring nightmares and flashback-induced epileptic seizures, Kameda is nonetheless released to civil society. On board a northbound train he meets and is befriended by a ruffian named Denkichi Akama, who's recently come into a large inheritance upon the death of his estranged father.**

**Denkichi plans to use a large chunk of this money to buy himself Taeko Nasu, orphaned mistress of wealthy Tohata, who had been her childhood guardian since the age of seven. Denkichi had met Taeko once when she had temporarily run away from Tohata's residence. Becoming quickly infatuated with her, he had promised to buy the abused young woman a diamond ring. This he managed to accomplish by stealing money from his dad.**

Now, with pledged ring in possession, he was returning to make a formal marriage proposal to Taeko and not about to let either Mr. Tohata or anyone else stand in his way.

After exiting the train, Denkichi and Kameda walk through the streets of Sapporo. The latter's attention is drawn to a portrait of Taeko in a window. He's fascinated by what he perceives as the suffering in her face. Denkichi, on the contrary, is fascinated solely by its beauty. He has no idea what his comrade is talking about.

The two then separate, Denkichi headed to his family estate and Kinji to lodgings with distant relative Ono. There he meets Mutsuo Kayama, Ono's secretary.

Mutsuo hopes to marry Tohata's discarded concubine the next day, much to the chagrin of other Kayama family members. Kinji advises foregoing such an espousal, triggering the office assistant's disgust and anger. Matters become even more heated when Ayako, Ono's younger daughter, rejects Mutsuo's secret request to marry her instead. She correctly denounces him by letter as merely a money-grabbing coward.

At Taeko's birthday party the following evening, Ono and Tohata plan to announce formally her engagement to Mutsuo. It seems Taeko herself has a different agenda. She and Kinji trade intense glances, becoming transfixed by the magnetism of opposites. His naivete and her world-weariness pull them together through curiosity and a tacit acknowledgment each is a social outcast. Their situation becomes increasingly supercharged by the arrival, uninvited, of Denkichi and a supportive band of drunks and rowdies. He offers an even bigger price for Taeko than Tohata's "dowry" settlement of six hundred thousand yen.

Taeko scorns both suitors and their proposed financial settlements. She grabs a bankroll of notes from the hands of an astonished Karube and throws them into the fireplace to burn. Unless Mr. Kayama would care to pull them out himself.

Karube makes a lurch to recover the money, but is compelled to retreat by heat and flames. No one else dares accept Taeko's challenge until the brazen mistress herself seizes the bundle in which bills are wrapped and transfers it to Kayama as a reward for not being so crass as to make a frantic dash into the fire for them himself.

Then, to everyone else's surprise, Kinji makes a proposal of marriage to the pariah. At first she accepts, just to spite the other suitors. Then she changes her mind and leaves with Denkichi and his companions, knowing she could never make a "foolish" kindred spirit happy.

What follows is a double game of cat and mouse. Taeko alternately pursues and rejects both Denkichi and Kinji. While Ono's younger daughter, Ayako, adopts a parallel stratagem pitting Kameda against Kayama. Both are competing for her as a consolation prize. She, indecisive and relentlessly fickle, cannot decide on either.

Kameda is sickly, unable to detach himself from Taeko. Kayama lacks passionate commitment to anyone.

Those acquainted with femme fatales of film noir know how this will end in tragedy for all parties. Just as in Dostoevsky's novel, no one obtains what he or she seeks. However, unlike the Russian author's redemptive ending for his hero, Kurosawa simply eliminated both protagonist and antagonist, leaving behind confused, more earthbound associates. His point being goodness and perfect love are destined to fail and be eradicated in the real world of human relationships. The ideal cannot co-exist with reality on this planet.

Donald Richie's commentary on *Hakuchi* doesn't address the observable film at all. Probably because he was obsessed with how different Kurosawa's treatment of the material is from Dostoevsky's. The film director sensibly reduced the number of characters, subplots, and settings to a more manageable total. Nor was it misguided of him to include the Fire Festival scene, which paired grotesque costuming with equally bizarre behavior on the part of a quintet of wooers who preferred torturing each other to reciprocating the pleasure of one another's company.

Obviously, three men and two women cannot split evenly and amiably into couples. Someone would need to surrender his ambition. Here, no male chooses to do so. The consequence of such pride of possessiveness is unhappiness for all.

Wipes proliferate in this film with optimal effectiveness, abbreviating what otherwise would constitute sluggish movements through time and space. Dialogue is telling; gestures even more so.

**Yoshiko Kuga gave a wonderful performance. Her eventual transformation from Ayako Ono's gently teasing innocent to tiger-like, accusatory romantic rival is utterly believable and finely shaded.**

**Setsuko Hara was ideally cast as an intelligent, much-abused woman. Once seizing freedom from a dominant, oppressive male she found herself unable to use her new power and liberty for anything better than bringing emotional devastation upon admirers. As self-destructive complex of contradictions, Setsuko created one of the most unforgettable antagonists ever seen on screen, her facial expressions changing minutely to record every wrinkle of evolving emotion. She continued developing her character even during silences, relying on subtle shifts of lips or increase of intensity in gaze to convey much more than mere words.**

**As child-like Kinji Kameda, Masayuki Mori brought to his character essential qualities of frankness, timidity, humbleness, and self-doubt.**

**Senior Ono spouses, portrayed by Chieko Higashiyama and Takashi Shimura, are loving, amenable to compromise, often befuddled by secret assignments and underhanded communications of the younger generation. Though well-intentioned and good-humored, the two are frequently kept at a distance from children they're trying to protect and provide with happy futures. Not so acerbic as their elder daughter nor as crass as secretarial employee Mitsuo, the couple are a welcome, sometimes comic relief from the agitated turmoil of Denkichi Akama and Taeko Nasu.**

**Denkichi's smoldering, resentful jealousy was beautifully communicated by Toshiro Mifune's aggressive violence in both speech and movement. In fact, his boorish, primitive mood swings from gentleness to rudeness gave a distinctly Russian feel to the drama, matching the flare-ups and iciness of Setsuko Hara's conflicted Taeko.**

**Despite very limited screen time, Daisuke Inoue's Kaoru had just the right mix of sauciness, sensitivity and compassion.**

**Akio Tamura's lighting and Yoshisaburo Imo's sound supervision added substantially to the film's effectiveness, particularly in candlelight episodes, a skating sequence, and the unexpected noisy slide of snow masses from a roof.**

**Quite as notable here was So Matsuyama's art direction, especially in manufacturing a lair-like ice-riddled home for frequently hibernating, fur-**

wrapped Denkichi. His designs for masks in the Fire Festival scene were likewise compellingly savage and threatening.

Whether intentional or not, the screenplay of Eijirō Hisaita and Akira Kurosawa provided a masterful condensation of a rambling epic novel. Of course, some philosophizing and theological musings of Dostoevsky had to be omitted as non-cinematic distractions. Moving the story from Victorian-era Russia to postwar 1940s Japan did no harm, either. It actually made the drama more relevant and less connected to any particular geographical location.

Perhaps never in his career did Kurosawa manage a cast with more finesse. There's not a single misstep by any of the leads or chief supporting characters, except for Bokuzen Hidari's Karube, who's too much of a clown in both facial expression and gestures. Each female performer provided as potent and fully realized a character embodiment as even the original author could have hoped.

As for the score, selections from orchestral classics underpinned ambience magnificently. Fiendishly swirling, madcap Russian themes of Mussorgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain" matched well Fire Festival activity. Hibernian suggestiveness of Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King" was an absolutely faultless match for the gloomy, dark perilousness of Akama's den.

Quite possibly the apex of Kurosawa's illustrious career, *Hakuchi* stands as a monument to optimal adaptation of written word to movie screen. It's indubitably a classic which will only increase in honor as time passes, mixing speech and action with consummate skill so that neither obtrudes unduly on the other. Highly recommended for adult viewers. Don't pass up an opportunity to see one of the grandest of all Japanese films on a Criterion Collection dvd.