



*Nora inu (Stray Dog)* is a subtitled live action Japanese feature drama directed by Akira Kurosawa. Below is Kino Ken's review of that film based on a YouTube screening and later viewing of its Criterion dvd release.

18 of a possible 20 points = \*\*\*\*1/2 = a minor film classic

Japan 1949 black-and-white 122 minutes subtitled live action feature drama  
 Producers: Akira Kurosawa, Sōjirō Motoki, Senkichi Taniguchi, and Kajirō Yamamoto  
 Film Art Association / Shintoho Film Distribution Committee / Toho

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

Points:

- 2 Direction: Akira Kurosawa
- 1 Editing: Toshio Gotō and Yoshi Sugihara
- 2 Cinematography: Asakazu Nakai\*

- Still Photography: Issei Tanaka\***
- 2 Lighting: Chōshiro Ishii**
  - 1 Screenplay: Ryūzō Kikushima and Akira Kurosawa**  
**Script Supervision: Hachiko Toi**
  - 2 Music: Fumio Hayasaka\***  
**Choreography: Yoji Ken**
  - 2 Production Design: Takashi Matsuyama\***
  - 2 Sound: Fumio Yanoguchi\***  
**Sound Effects: Ichirō Minawa\***
  - 2 Acting**
  - 2 Creativity**
  - 18 total points**

**Cast: Toshiro Mifune\* (Detective Murakami), Takashi Shimura\* (Chief Detective Satō), Keiko Awaji\* (Harumi Namiki), Eiko Miyoshi (Madame Namiki), Noriko Sengoku (gun trader's mistress), Noriko Honma (woman of wooden tub shop), Reikichi Kawamura (Officer Ichikawa), Eijirō Tōno (old man of wooden tub shop), Yasushi Nagata (Investigation Chief Abe), Isao Kimura\* (Shinjiro Yusa), Teruko Kishi (Ogin), Minoru Chiaki\* (dance director), Ichirō Sugai (Yayoi Hotel owner), Hajime Izu (criminal identification officer), Masao Shimizu (Nakamura), Kokuten Kōdō (old landlord), Yūnosuke Itō (manager of Bluebird Theatre), Akira Ubukata (police doctor), Fujio Nagahama (Sakura Hotel manager), Kō Ubukata (page in pompadour hair), Shiro Mizutani (punkster), Eizō Tanaka (old doctor), Kazuko Motohashi (Sato's wife), Haruko Tōgō (Azuma Hotel Madame), Haruko Toyama (Kintarō), Mie Asō (woman at pinball parlor), Rikie Sanjō (wife of manager), Chōko Iida (Kōgetsu Hotel manageress), Ishirō Honda (fleeing villain), Kappei Matsumoto (bar owner), Haruo Nakajima and Hajime Taniguchi (bar fight deleted scenes)**

**It's a steamy summer day in Tokyo. Detective Murakami engages in some fruitless pistol shooting at a police firing range, then boards a jammed commuter trolley where his weapon is stolen by a female pickpocket. The junior policeman, unable to overtake a fleeing male accessory, glumly reports his loss to a superior, expecting to be summarily dismissed from the force. Instead, his**

superior simply docks him some pay. This forgiveness on their part only further stokes his sense of guilty negligence. He resolves to pursue the thief and recover stolen property. No matter how long or arduous such an undertaking might prove.

A fortunate break comes when the greenhorn sleuth spots a mug shot of the woman standing beside him on the trolley. His boss asserts she's a repeat offender well-known to their department. He muses about Murakami's insistence the suspect wore western clothes. She had always dressed in traditional kimonos during the war years. Was she accommodating herself to postwar fashion?

After an initial visit with a stonewalling champion of civil rights, Murakami's advised by older superior Sato to shadow her. Perhaps relentless accompaniment will prove nerve-racking enough to produce a confession. Or at least some lead about who might currently possess his pistol.

Disguised as a down-on-his-luck war veteran, Murakami wanders the streets of Tokyo. He hopes to gain acceptance as a prospective yakuza in search of an untraceable gun. Hours turn into days. Black market dealers remain wary and distanced. Finally, one takes the plunge and arranges for a transaction at a certain entertainment hotspot. But when Murakami arrives early and enters into conversation with the gun merchant's girlfriend, he's identified by his quarry as a law enforcement officer. The potential seller vamooses.

His stalling girl ally is arrested. Some useful information is obtained from her. It seems the runaway gun peddler's name is Tachibana, though he also uses an alias of Honda. Mr. Tachibana, according to the informant, is an ardent baseball fan.

Armed with that piece of news, Murakami, Sato, and a detachment of police officers mingle with spectators at a hotly contested game between Giants and Hawks in Korakuen Stadium. Their task is to spot and arrest a lone unlicensed arms dealer in a crowd of tens of thousands. That they must accomplish without generating a public alarm.

At this point in the film, director Kurosawa loses his way a bit, offering too many irrelevant views of play on the field that add nothing to plot, characterization, or ambience.

Eventually would-be trappers hit on the idea of calling their suspect over the public address system. Their first attempt fails to lure him out because

Tachibana decides to ignore a summons addressed to Honda. When a second announcement is made using his real name, the ruse works better and Tachibana is cornered successfully. A rice ration card in his possession incriminates an ex-soldier named Yusa. Who is apparently carrying a firearm borrowed from Tachibana. He's using it to steal and murder, adding to Murakami's woes.

Yusa is traced to his family home, where he has been living in a makeshift hovel apart from other relatives. While a sister defends her sibling's isolation, an older male present is less tolerant. He denounces the young man as merely a deadbeat parasite.

The questioning pair of authorities now see firsthand Yusa's living accommodations and environment. They also manage to obtain the name of his girlfriend. Unfortunately for them, Yusa himself is not around during their visit.

A search for dancer Harumi Namiki, Yusa's sweetheart, at first generates no progress in tracking a man who's ostensibly carrying Murakami's stolen firearm. Harumi refuses to cooperate. Why should she? Yusa's been generous to her, providing a stylish western dress she could never have purchased from income netted hoofing at a dance hall. What if he did kill someone in the process of obtaining cash to squander on her? That was his business. Not hers. When the girl's appalled parent hears such callous remarks, she threatens to turn her amoral daughter out of their home.

Harumi remains defiant and belligerent. Sensing an impasse, Sato tells his colleague to stay put. He will attempt to track down Yusa solo, knowing his penchant for patronizing dancers in tawdry dives.

Continuing to eat away at the younger officer is knowledge, confirmed by forensic lab analysis, that his misappropriated pistol is killing innocent people. This "stray dog" with its new master is not upholding law and order but violently, lethally undermining it.

Sadly, its guilt-ridden pursuer always arrives belatedly at crime scenes, witnessing bloody aftermaths without means to either forestall or terminate them.

Will he or Sato ever catch Yusa? How many more victims will the "rabid dog" kill before they do?

Easily the finest of Kurosawa's pre-*Rashomon* crime dramas, *Stray Dog* manifests considerably more mobility, tension, and complexity than such

previous pictures as *The Quiet Duel* and *Drunken Angel*. This time around, the director got his casting right. Shimura is excellent as a tutelary professional. Mifune likewise hits the mark squarely as an agitated and negligently naïve beginner, full of sincerity but woefully short of tact, patience, and precision. By the time this drama completes its course, he's learned to pay more attention to details. This is evidenced by his correctly picking out Yusa from a roomful of waiting strangers in a train station using observation of three telltale clues. Tact and patience will require longer periods of seasoning.

Other estimable performances here are turned in by sixteen-year-old Keiko Awaji, making her screen debut as sullenly combative Harumi Namiki, and Eiko Miyoshi as Namiki's distraught, disapprovingly traditional mother.

Editing is superb with regard to a lengthy montage depicting Murakami's wearying journeys through Yakuza black market territory in hopes of making connection with a "hot" handgun middleman. By stretching out his torrid ploddings, audiences are compelled to share in the young man's boredom and mounting exhaustion. These scenes were supervised by Ishirō Honda, soon to win fame as director of *Godzilla*. It seems he was more expendable than co-star Mifune or samurai-descended Kurosawa.

Less effective is the cutting in stadium scenes cited above.

The screenplay adapted from a Kurosawa novel is serviceable, yet a little too overtly sermonizing. Dialogue could have been more enigmatic, especially since writers were ambivalent about judgments regarding polar opposite World War II veterans. Kurosawa would show superior acumen when creating the final confrontation between Gondo and Takeuchi in *High and Low*. In the latter film, self-identification with another is depicted primarily through visual means. It consequently anchors more firmly in viewer memory.

Lighting, cinematography, production design, and sound are all top-drawer in execution.

Fumio Hayasaka's score contains snatches of sentimental prewar Japanese ballads and more abrasive pop Western tunes. Its mingling of these evokes a rather melancholy sense of American and European intrusion upon Japanese customs and time-honored lifestyles.

Overall, this film is a seminal Kurosawa drama for adult audiences, revealing Japan's postwar bleakness and declining moral values while at the same time highlighting the rather insidious manner in which American underworld mores

were injecting themselves into Japanese society. It's really a cautionary tale, not just about being more watchful about guns but also about paying close attention to moral tradeoffs an incoming dominant culture might bring in its wake. It's hard to resist temptations arriving gift-wrapped from self-proclaimed benefactors.

Very highly recommended viewing for adults.

This reviewer is indebted to Wikipedia articles headed "Stray Dog" and "Korakuen Stadium" for information relating to the film's baseball scenes. Additional bits of data derive from pages devoted to *Stray Dog* in Donald Richie's *The Films of Akira Kurosawa, Revised Edition*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1984.

There are three quite illuminating bonus features included in the Criterion dvd release.

One is an audio commentary by author Stephen Prince, which includes scene-specific information about camera setups, studio shots versus location footage, last-minute and post-take revisions, and appearances by cast members in later Kurosawa features.

The second is a thirty-three minute documentary titled in English *Akira Kurosawa: It Is Wonderful to Create*. Then novice film actress Keiko Awaji shares with auditors anecdotes about her experiences with director Kurosawa and actor Mifune. Production Designer Yoshiro Muraki talks about the difficulty of creating more than thirty different open sets for this film. An assistant sound technician recounts how Kurosawa used diegetic sound and music to counterpoint action at key moments and relates how exhausting it was for the director to locate a specific arrangement of "La Paloma," a song incorrectly identified as "La Palma" in Criterion's subtitling.

Also included in the Criterion package are an essay about the picture by film critic Terrence Rafferty and an extract from the English translation of Kurosawa's own *Something Like an Autobiography* in which the author opines "the films an audience really enjoys are the ones that were enjoyable in the making."<sup>1</sup> Such, for him, was *Stray Dog*, Keiko Awaji's contrariness notwithstanding apparently.

<sup>1</sup> From *Something Like an Autobiography* by Akira Kurosawa, translated into English by Audie E. Bock. Copyright, 1982 by Akira Kurosawa and published by

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