Subarashiki Nichiyobi resonant of Kurosawa’s early works

SUBARASHIKI NICHIIYOBI
[ONE WONDERFUL SUNDAY]
Directed by Akira Kurosawa
Screenplay by Kurosako Uetagawa and Akira Kurosawa
Starring Isao Numasaki and Chieko Nakakita.
Plays tonight at 5:45 and 9:50 pm at the Brattle Theater.

By MANAVENDRA K. THAKUR

I T'S A FAMILIAR STANDARD PROCESS. Af- ter a film director becomes a major figure of international cinema, the director’s early films become the game for film scholars, distributors, and viewers to examine, dissect, and re-evaluate. Akira Kurosawa has been a major figure for at least thirty years, and one can’t help but wonder why it has taken so long for his early films to come to light. In this country, Kurosawa’s Subarashiki Nichiyobi (“One Wonderful Sunday”) was first released in Japan way back in 1947, but it was not subtitled into English until 1981, and only now is it being premiered theatrically in this country along with other Kurosawa films from the post-war period.

What happens more often than not, though, with early films of this type is that signs of the director’s growth as an artist are heavily focused on—often to the exclusion of evaluating the film as an individual work standing on its own. With regard to Kurosawa’s Subarashiki Nichiyobi, it is important to remember that although many of Kurosawa’s trademark stylistic touches show up for the first time in his work, the film’s daring experiment falls on its own merits.

The film’s title refers to a certain Sunday in springtime that two young lovers spend together in Tokyo. The film begins with Yuzu (Isao Numasaki) waiting at a train station for his fiancée Masako (Chieko Nakakita). Between the two of them, they have a total of only 15 yen, and so they wander the city looking for ways to stretch their money. This is not the first such day they have spent together, and Yuzu particularly feels morose and angry about their inability to raise enough money to buy a house. (They can’t get married before they buy a house. (They can’t get married before they buy a house). This is not the first such day they have spent together, and Yuzu particularly feels morose and angry about their inability to raise enough money to buy a house. (They can’t get married before they buy a house. (They can’t get married before they buy a house)).

When they go to view a house selling for 100,000 yen—way out of their price range—Masako eagerly flits around the house in delight. “You’re a dreamer,” chides Yuzu. “Be realistic. We’re broke.” She replies, “That’s why we need dreams. I’d die without dreams.”

Her sentiments lie squarely within Frank Capra-land, and indeed, it’s not too surprising to learn that Kurosawa admired Capra and other American film directors like D. W. Griffith (which may be one reason why Kurosawa is so admired in the West). Because Subarashiki Nichiyobi combines that Capraesque optimism with a sense of time in Rashōmon, it is resonant of Kurosawa’s remarkable manipulation of time in Rashōmon, which is as complete in its sound as it is complete in Subarashiki Nichiyobi. Its sound is as complete in Subarashiki Nichiyobi as it would be seven years later in The Seven Samurai, where Kurosawa staged a staggering battle sequence with little more than a telephone line and a reinauding device.

Other noteworthy techniques include Kurosawa’s use of hidden cameras on actual streets while filming city scenes and Kurosawa’s remarkable manipulation of music, with significant actions often beginning as the music changes key. And Kurosawa’s venture into the poverty-row world of war orphans and slums prefigures his Ikiru, released in 1952. It becomes especially clear that Kurosawa’s early films are the result of a director’s growth as he discovers an invisible orchestra as Masako encourages him on. But when Yuzu fal ters, Kurosawa has Masako take the most unusual step of directly appealing to the film’s audience for applause to help bolster Yuzu’s confidence. “Help. Please. Everyone applaud...” Please please applaus... “Help all those poor lovers out there like us!” she cries. This scene epitomizes the fundamental contra diction of the film: a more experienced director perhaps could have made such a scene truly work, but then again, it’s doubtful that a more experienced director would have attempted such a bold, unusual technique. Certainly, Kurosawa never again used it again in his later films.

In sum, these early Kurosawa films will be of interest to the casual viewer, but they will be of particular interest to those more familiar with Kurosawa’s later works. But the fact that these early films were released at all is a strong reaffirmation of Kurosawa’s towering reputation as well as a welcome opportunity to experience his creative genius in its flowering phase.

Subarashiki Nichiyobi

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