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FILM REVIEW: Mifune: The Last Samurai (Okazaki, 2015): Japan

Description

Reviewed by Larry Gleeson

Viewed during AFIFEST 2016 presented by Audi, Mifune: The Last Samurai, directed by Steven Okazaki, is a feature-length documentary about the life and films of legendary Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune. Okazaki utilizes archival clips, photographic stills and interviews with those who worked with Mifune. The film is narrated by Keanu Reeves.

Interestingly, the film is more of a creative interpretation of specific formative elements, both personal and cultural, that led to Mifuneâ??s distinct personality. Okazaki presents Mifune is a non-linear fashion. He opens the film with the infamous rape scene from *Rashomon*. From there he discusses Mifuneâ??s approach to some of his *Rashomon* scenes. Apparently, to embody the untamed animal instinct of his character, Mifune studied the movements and behavior of a lion. To add substance to such a claim, Okazaki shows, much to the audienceâ??s delight, Mifune closing in on his samurai opponent in a lion-like fashion.

Iconic Japanese Director Akira Kurasaw, left, and legendary Japanese Actor Toshiro Mifune, during

The 1950â??s and 60â??s were a Golden Age for Japanese Film. Iconic Japanese Director Akira Kurasawa had won the Golden Lion at Venice with *Rashomon* in 1951 putting Japanese films on the world scene. Kurasawa and Mifune would go on to collaborate on 16 films over an eighteen year period including renowned, classic films such of *Rashomon (1950), Seven Samurai (1954), Throne of Blood (1957)* and *Yojimbo (1961).*

Telling interviews from Kyoko Kagawa, Takeshi Kato, Haruo Nakajima, Yosuke Natsoki and Sadao Nakajima reveal Mifuneâ??s ardent preparation for roles, painstakingly researching and laborious rehearsal processes. Kurasawa rarely, if ever, gave Mifune specific direction on creating characters. Other interviews came from American directors Martin Scorcese and Steven Spielberg revealing the admiration and respect Mifune garnered not only in Japan but in Hollywood as well.

With the advent of war in 1931 and Japan invading Manchuria every able-bodied Japanese male was conscripted into service including Mifune. Mifune and his parents were Japanese Nationalists living in China at the time. Mifuneâ??s early experiences in the war consisted of a lot of beatings as his superior officers found his tone of voice off-putting and insubordination charges followed. By warâ??s end males as young as eleven years old were brought into the army and referred to as Little Citizens and Children of the Emperor. Mifuneâ??s role became training the young men as Kamakaziâ??s. Both of Mifuneâ??s parents were casualties of the war.

After the war, time were tough for the Japanese. Men sold their suits and women sold their socks just to have enough to eat. Mifune made himself a pair of trousers and a matching coat from his army blanket. Such a look, coupled with his strong voice, gave Mifune a big presence. He applied for a camera assistant position with a film studio and got the position. However, in 1947, Mifune made his entrance as an actor in Kurasawaâ??s *Snow Trail.* Kurasawa was impressed with Mifuneâ??s work and began writing bigger and better roles for Mifune. Mifune would not go back to being a camera assistant.

Kurasawa was a well-known director in Japan before the war and continued filmmaking during the war years with propaganda films. The US banned swordplay films after the war for seven years. When the ban was lifted Kurasawa was ready with one of the great films in cinematic history, *Seven Samurai*, with Mifune playing a often humorous, wanna-be Samurai. Mifuneâ??s father had been a photographer and young Toshiro often posed as a Samurai for photos.

Mifune became an inspiration for young actors who found his minimalist approach accessible. Often referred to as the John Wayne of Japan, Toshiro Mifune is The Last Samurai. Warmly recommendedâ?¦a cinephileâ??s dream!

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