

## Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 5: King Lear/Ran

**Reading:** *King Lear*, 1608, drama, Shakespeare

**Film:** , 1985, (160 min.), Kurosawa

**Suggested grades:** 10-12 and college

### Themes:

Of several possible themes connecting these historical dramas to the personal concerns of students is the timeless and transcultural tragedy of the destruction of a family. The heritage of a father's past sins corrupts the relationships between family members, finally pitting sons against their father and brothers against each other. Other themes involved are betrayal and loyalty, vengeance and forgiveness, appearance and reality, and the nature of tragedy in the human condition.

### The story:

Although Kurosawa used Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a source for his film, his goal was to create a film morality play, one which combined the traditional of Shakespearean tragedy and Japanese Noh drama in an artistic vision of the condition of modern man. Kurosawa's *Lear*, the war lord Hidetora Ichimonji, is an old ruler who wants to leave behind the years of violence and bloodshed in his ruthless struggles for regional power. Now he wants peace, and to divide his land and power between his three sons while retaining the title and dignity of his position. But, as in *King Lear*, the father's mistake is to connect the division with the love each child claims to have for the father. The two oldest profess their boundless love and duty to their father while the youngest incurs the wrath of the father by refusing to play the game, refusing to exaggerate or lie. Both Shakespeare's and Kurosawa's fathers are blind to the inner nature of love. They equate words and appearances with truth and reality, banishing the seemingly ungrateful, unloving youngest. That is the beginning of both tragedies.

The important differences between these two works are not in the Western or Japanese settings or in the changes in plot and characters but rather in the aesthetic of the artistic medium and in the religious-spiritual context of each work.

First, the artistic medium of Shakespeare's works is primarily the art of language and character. Tracing down the sources of almost anyone of this thirty-six plays, one finds strong "borrowings" from other earlier plays or histories. Yet translated into Shakespeare's language and dramatic form, these earlier flat works take on new dimensions in the power of poetic language and the psychological complexity of living characters. On any stage, in any interpretation, historical or modern, the language and characters emerge as Shakespearean.

For Kurosawa the artistic medium is the camera and image. The language still moves and shapes the plot and theme, but it is in the metaphorical quality of the image, scene, and finally the visual choreography of the entire work that the artistic

achievement and meaning emerge. We must study images and visual patterns or motifs in the same way we examine the language text of Shakespeare.

Secondly, the religious-spiritual context: Shakespeare's world is that of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a monotheistic universe in which a benevolent God watches over the drama of man. The plays were written to be performed in the Globe Theater, on a stage which symbolically placed man between heaven and hell. In the drama, the words become flesh and characters. Those characters are both symbolic and real. When Lear emerges from his prison weeping with the body of Cordelia in his arms, we are meant to cry, to cry at the frailty of human beings, of actions, words, hopes.

Kurosawa's world overlays this tradition on the Shinto-Buddhist traditions of Japanese culture. His film is created to play on the screens of the world, visually one language, in sub-titles many. The images are of life; the characters, their emotions, their blood, all vivid, real. Yet there is a sense of distance not present in the Shakespearean experience. It is as if we are viewing these people and their world from an emotional distance. The camera and the stylized acting contribute to this distance. But so also does the Buddhist outlook. In the tragic conclusion, the Fool will question, "Are there no god...no Buddha?" He will shake his fist at the heavens and say, "If you exist, hear me! You are...cruel...Is it such fun to see a man weep?" And the faithful, wise Tango will reply, "It is the gods who weep...Don't cry. It's how the world is made. Men prefer sorrow over joy, suffering over peace." One of the final images will be of a scroll image of the Amida Buddha. This is tragedy viewed from a Buddhist perspective, one in which the emotions of man are a result of his continued attachment to the illusions of this world. We are not meant to purge ourselves with tears and return to the every day drama of life. Rather we are asked to reflect on the condition of man and the meaning of his life. The tears of *Ran* are inner tears of awareness and compassion.

### Teaching:

The basic approach of this unit is to compare and contrast the two works as artistic mirrors of their respective cultures. Although the film may be taught as a historical period piece, history for Kurosawa works as metaphor and symbol, with images and scenes reflecting the social and moral condition of man, or in this case the family of man, past and present. If there are time limitations to showing the entire 160 minute film, it is possible to use selections to work toward some understanding of the entire works, its structure and themes. Once students are familiar with the plot and characters of *King Lear* (through the text and use of one of the various film-video versions of the play) they can compare and contrast selected scenes from *Ran*. The three following segments can be shown and discussed in three to four classes.

1. The opening: Hidetora's decision to divide the land and power amongst his three sons and his banishment of the youngest (Minutes 9-21, a total of 11 minutes).
2. The middle: Hidetora's defeat and madness (minutes 54-75, from where he learns of youngest son's love and loyalty through the brutal carnage of the attack on the castle by the two disloyal sons, ending with the father's bewildered lapse into madness as he wanders from the burning castle, a total of 21 minutes. If a comparison of Shakespeare's and Kurosawa's "heath" scenes is desired, the next ten minutes of the film can be included.
3. The ending: (minutes 135-160) in which the two armies clash and the youngest son is reunited with his father in the tragic conclusion.

Like *King Lear*, *Ran* is a tragedy of the destruction of a family presented as a metaphor of the destruction of the family of man. "Ichimon" in Japanese means family or clan; "ichi" is the word for one or first and suggests a unity. The deep divisions in Kurosawa's Ichimonji family point to a particular period in Japanese history racked by fratricidal

civil wars, but they also point to the 20th century and the continued universal wars in the human family. While the goals of these wars may range from personal ambition for power to some transcending vision of human unity and peace, the chosen path is one of the continued bloodshed and suffering rather than of love.

The problem for the viewer and student of *Ran*, is to question and understand a little of the WHY? of this family tragedy. Is the cause the father himself? Has Hidetora taught his sons *only* the uses of lies, deceptions, betrayals and ruthless bloodshed in the ambitious lust for power? Is the cause the powerful force of vengeance present in Lady Kaede? Is she the primary force in the downfall of the Ichmonji family? Or thirdly, is the cause of the tragedy the moral cancer of the times which consumes the traditional family bonds? Whatever the cause or causes, the focus of the film is Hidetora who must bear the brunt of the tragedy - the betrayal by sons, vassals, and time.

A second problem in understanding *Ran* and particularly the conclusion, is to see the moral vision which emerges from tragedy. Shakespeare's world operates within a natural order. Man violates this order and sets in motion the forces of tragedy. In the end through suffering and death, a new order, a new hope, evolves and life goes on. In *King Lear* the Duke of Albany will become King and through his leadership and the support of the good son Edgar, the Earl of Gloucester, the moral order will be rebuilt and perpetuated.

Amidst the spreading evil in Kurosawa's world of *Ran*, there is good, inexplicable loyalty, forgiveness and love. But in the end we are left with the image of a blind man alone at the edge of a precipice, apparently at sunset. He drops the scroll of the Amida Buddha which is supposed to watch over him, to protect him from the evil about him. One must ask where are the redemptive human and moral forces of Shakespearean tragedy, or is this Kurosawa's final image of man, a nihilistic image in which there is no redemption?

To answer this question, the students must note the film's examples of enduring goodness: the youngest son, the loyal servant Tango, the enigmatic character of the Fool, the film-framing presence of the Lords Rujimaki and Ayabe. The responsibility of leadership and a reconstruction of the moral order will revert to them. But what of the future in their hands? Near the conclusion, Tango says that the gods "see us killing each other over and over since time began. They can't save us from ourselves." The final question must grow out of those words: but can we save ourselves? The final scene and its music and images contain the only answers Kurosawa provides.

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