

## MEDIA RELEASE

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01am WEDNESDAY 12 APRIL 2017**

# DAVID STRATTON CURATES AKIRA KUROSAWA RETROSPECTIVE

Sydney Film Festival, Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFA) and The Japan Foundation announce that David Stratton will present a program of 10 essential films directed by the great Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa.

Entitled **Essential Kurosawa: Selected by David Stratton**, the curated films will screen as a retrospective program at the **Art Gallery of New South Wales** and **Dendy Opera Quays** cinema, as part of the **64<sup>th</sup> Sydney Film Festival (7-18 June)**. The retrospective will also screen in Melbourne at ACMI (25 May-8 June) and in Canberra at NFA's Arc cinema (14 June-30 June).

This retrospective consists of ten of the finest films made by Kurosawa, from **Rashomon** (1950) to **Ran** (1985), with specially imported 35mm prints courtesy of The Japan Foundation and Toho Co. Ltd.

Akira Kurosawa was a master of action, influenced by directors like John Ford, who in turn influenced a younger generation of filmmakers like Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas and Martin Scorsese.

Renowned critic and broadcaster, David Stratton, a former director of the Sydney Film Festival (1966 to 1983), will introduce the Sydney screenings and a number of the Melbourne and Canberra screenings.

**David Stratton** said, "During the 'golden era' of Japanese cinema, Akira Kurosawa was by far the best-known Japanese director internationally. His films were not only accessible, they were marvellously executed."

"The best of Kurosawa's films possess a grandeur combined with a common touch. No-one filmed action scenes like he did – his use of multiple cameras, long lenses and intricate editing combined to make these sequences unforgettable."

### The 10 films in the program are:

*Rashomon* (1950)

*Living (Ikiru)* 35mm (1952)

*Seven Samurai* 35mm (1954)

*Throne of Blood* 35mm (1957)

*The Hidden Fortress* 35mm (1958)

*Yojimbo* 35mm (1961)

*High and Low* 35mm (1963)

*Red Beard* 35mm (1965)

*Kagemusha* (1980)

*Ran* (1985)

Sydney Film Festival Director **Nashen Moodley** said, "Widely acknowledged as one of the greatest and most influential film directors of all time, Akira Kurosawa created many masterpieces in his over 50 years of filmmaking. Kurosawa really opened up the eyes of the western world to Japanese cinema, and his humanist approach uniquely explored the problems and concerns of 'ordinary' people as much as his famed warriors. With an astonishing 66 films to his credit this retrospective is an essential guide to Kurosawa's greatest hits, and certainly crucial viewing for film fans."

ACMI's Head of Film Programs, **James Hewison** said, "ACMI is once again thrilled to be working with the venerable David Stratton and of course our good friends SFF, NFSA and the Japan Foundation to be presenting this Kurosawa program. Audiences will have the chance to experience the majesty of this towering auteur's work on the big screen, where it belongs."

Acting NFSA CEO **Meg Labrum** said, "Akira Kurosawa and David Stratton are masters of their respective crafts. We're excited to welcome David to Arc cinema with Essential Kurosawa, and proud to continue our partnership with SFF and ACMI to bring these amazing retrospectives to Canberra for the third consecutive year. Arigato gozaimasu to all involved!"

The Japan Foundation, Sydney Director **Yoshihiro Wada** says, "We are excited to contribute to the Essential Kurosawa retrospective program through our 35mm film library. In this program, one can truly come to understand the breadth of influence Kurosawa has on film history throughout the 20th century. We sincerely hope that this retrospective will not only attract a wide audience, but also become an opportunity to deepen interest in Japan and Japanese films as a whole."

A recipient of the Australian Film Institute's Raymond Longford Award and named Commander of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, David Stratton AM has also served as President of the FIPRESCI (International Film Critics) jury in Cannes and served on the international juries of both Venice and Berlin film festivals, authored three books and lectured in Film History at the University of Sydney. He co-hosted *The Movie Show* and *At the Movies* with Margaret Pomeranz for 29 years.

**Sydney Film Festival tickets are on sale now for Essential Kurosawa: Selected by David Stratton** screenings for \$19.90 (Adult) each or Concession \$17.00 + booking fee.

A **special discount package** of all ten films in the retrospective is available for \$130 + booking fee.

**Flexipasses and subscriptions to Sydney Film Festival 2017 are on sale now.**

**Call 1300 733 733 or visit [sff.org.au](http://sff.org.au) for more information.**

**The full Sydney Film Festival program is announced in May 2017.**

Tickets to **Essential Kurosawa** at ACMI in Melbourne are \$18 Adult, \$14 Concession, \$12 ACMI Member. Tickets are available online [acmi.net.au/essential-kurosawa](http://acmi.net.au/essential-kurosawa), via phone 03 8663 2583 or in person at ACMI Fed Square. ACMI will hold a lecture by David Stratton during its season. Check the [acmi.net.au](http://acmi.net.au) for details.

Tickets to **Essential Kurosawa** at Arc cinema, NFSA (Acton, ACT) are \$14 Adult, \$12 Concession, and season passes (\$75 / \$80) also available. Tickets are available online <http://bit.ly/EssentialKurosawa>

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**\*\*\*Sydney Film Festival Press Pack and Images Available [HERE](#)**

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## ABOUT SYDNEY FILM FESTIVAL

From **Wednesday 7 June to Sunday 18 June 2017**, the 64<sup>th</sup> Sydney Film Festival offers Sydneysiders another exciting season of cinema amidst a whirlwind of premieres, red-carpet openings, in-depth discussions, international guests and more.

Sydney Film Festival also presents an Official Competition of 12 films that vie for the Sydney Film Prize, a highly respected honour that awards a \$60,000 cash prize based on the decision of a jury of international and Australian filmmakers and industry professionals. Previous Sydney Film Prize winners: *Aquarius* (2016); *Arabian Nights* (2015); *Two Days, One Night* (2014); *Only God Forgives* (2013); *Alps* (2012); *A Separation* (2011); *Heartbeats* (2010); *Bronson* (2009); and *Hunger* (2008).



The Festival takes place across Greater Sydney: at the State Theatre, Event Cinemas George Street, Dendy Opera Quays, Dendy Newtown, Skyline Drive-In Blacktown, Art Gallery of NSW, Hayden Orpheum Picture Palace Cremorne, Randwick Ritz, Casula Powerhouse, the Festival Hub at Sydney Town Hall and SFF Outdoor Screen in Pitt Street Mall.

The Festival is a major event on the New South Wales cultural calendar and is one of the world's longest-running film festivals. For more information visit: [www.sff.org.au](http://www.sff.org.au).

The 64<sup>th</sup> Sydney Film Festival is supported by the NSW Government through Screen NSW and Destination NSW, the Federal Government through Screen Australia and the City of Sydney. The Festival's Strategic Partner is the NSW Government through Destination NSW.

**Flexipasses and subscriptions to the 64th Sydney Film Festival (7-18 June 2017) are on sale now. Please call 1300 733 733 or visit [sff.org.au/preview](http://sff.org.au/preview) for more information.**

## ESSENTIAL KUROSAWA: SELECTED BY DAVID STRATTON

### **RASHOMON (1950)**

**An innovative murder mystery that explores the subjective nature of truth. Toshiro Mifune plays a bandit accused of murdering a samurai and raping his wife – but what actually happened?** The West was almost entirely ignorant of Japanese cinema before *Rashomon* screened at Venice in 1951 and won the Golden Lion. Essentially a story about the subjective nature of truth, the film is set in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. The source lies in two short stories, 'Rashomon' and 'In the Grove', written by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, who died in 1927; he has been compared to Edgar Allan Poe. In a dark forest, a woman is raped and her husband, a samurai, is murdered by a bandit. Four versions of the story unfold, each point of view offering a different perspective, a different 'reality'. Through a medium, the dead samurai claims he killed himself, unable to live with dishonour. The bandit insists the sex was consensual and that he killed the samurai in a duel. The film is notable for its adventurous photography, its innovative employment of light and shade, and for the skilled direction of the actors, notably the startlingly physical performance by Toshiro Mifune as the bandit accused of the crimes. Kurosawa had already made a dozen films prior to this extraordinary breakthrough and he deliberately set out to recreate the look and atmosphere of silent cinema.

### **LIVING (1952)**

**A middle-aged bureaucrat discovers he has terminal cancer and determines to do something useful with the remainder of his life. Kurosawa's most humanistic and ironic film.** The international success of *Rashomon* gave Kurosawa more creative freedom and he used this to make one of his finest films, *Ikiru*, which is translated variously as *Living* and *Doomed*. It's the story of office worker Kenji Watanabe, superbly played by Takashi Shimura, an actor in almost every Kurosawa film who rarely played a leading role. This 'ordinary' bureaucrat, in late middle age, is diagnosed with terminal cancer, and the news leads him to re-assess his life, and his determination to achieve something worthwhile before he dies. *Living* is one of Kurosawa's most humanistic films, but also one of his most ironic, which the later sequences indicate. The director said that the film was inspired by thoughts of his own death and of the legacy he would leave behind him. The most important aspect of the film lies in the fact that we do not see ourselves as others see us, so Watanabe's aspirations are misconstrued, or simply unappreciated, by his colleagues. It's a film that can be interpreted in more than one way, and in that sense it can be compared to *Rashomon*, though in every other respect these two great films of the early '50s could hardly be more different.

### **SEVEN SAMURAI (1954)**

**Farmers from a remote village, who are regularly attacked and robbed by bandits, seek help from seven warriors in this celebrated action epic.** Kurosawa's admiration for the American western, and his love for the films of John Ford, became evident to western audiences for the first time with this



thrilling epic, though at the time they were denied the opportunity of seeing the film in its original form. At about three and a half hours, the Japanese producers believed that the film would be too taxing for foreigners and insisted on shortening it by almost an hour, which is how it was seen for many years (including at its Australian debut at the 1956 Sydney Film Festival). Set in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the film introduces the peasant inhabitants of a remote village who live in fear of the annual raid by vicious bandits, who steal their crops and rape their women. They hire seven samurai, professional warriors, to protect them, and though the money they offer is paltry they find a leader (Takashi Shimura) willing to recruit a team and accept the challenge. The meticulous build-up to the vigorously staged action that constitutes the last third of the film is vital to establish the characters of both the peasants and the samurai, with Toshiro Mifune's 'fake' samurai the film's most intriguing character. Hollywood has twice transformed the film into a western, in 1960 and again in 2016.

### **THE THRONE OF BLOOD (1957)**

**'Macbeth' is brilliantly re-invented with elements of Noh theatre incorporated into the drama. A great screen adaptation of Shakespeare, beautiful and ominous.** Kurosawa has been both admired and denigrated for the influence western culture has had on his films. Apart from his debt to the American western, he has shown a great fondness and understanding for the work of giants of western literature, including Dostoyevsky and Shakespeare. He has made three films inspired by plays written by the latter: *The Bad Sleep Well* is a very loose adaptation of 'Hamlet', while *Ran* is a Japanese 'King Lear'. *The Throne of Blood* takes 'Macbeth' and transforms the tragedy into a grimly beautiful exploration of ambition and self-delusion. While sticking closely to the original, apart from a few minor details (one witch instead of three), Kurosawa made the film in the style of Noh theatre, resulting in a drama that blends realism with extreme stylisation. Toshiro Mifune gives his usual commanding performance as the Macbeth character, but even more impressive is the Lady Macbeth character, memorably portrayed by Isuzu Yamada, who is one of the very few villainesses in Kurosawa films and, as she glides through the sleeping castle at night, one of cinema's most impressive manipulators.

### **THE HIDDEN FORTRESS (1958)**

**The film that inspired *Star Wars* features a princess on the run from her enemies and the brave warrior who comes to her aid. An exciting widescreen adventure.** 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox introduced the widescreen system they called CinemaScope in 1953; the old 4:3 standard screen was replaced by the relatively vast 2:35:1 ratio, and before long the system had been licensed to other companies. Toho called the system TohoScope, and Kurosawa used it for the first time in 1958 on a film that set out to be nothing more than an elaborate entertainment. Set in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Japan, a time of civil wars, the film establishes the conflict between rival feudal lords. When Princess Yukihiime's clan is defeated by their neighbour, she manages to escape with her clan's war funds, 170 pounds of gold bars. A pair of scruffy, would-be samurai discover the gold, but they are quickly overcome by Rokurota (Toshiro Mifune), a fearless samurai loyal to the Princess and her clan. What follows is a rollicking adventure with significant comedy elements, in which Kurosawa uses the 'Scope ratio with peerless imagination. Famously, this is the film that inspired George Lucas to create *Star Wars*, which also has a princess in distress and other characters that were derived from Kurosawa's film. Some contemporary critics believed that the ragged foot soldiers were inspired by Laurel and Hardy.

### **YOJIMBO (1961)**

**Toshiro Mifune is the fastest sword in the East in an exciting and entertaining film that inspired Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars*.** Once again, Kurosawa demonstrated his love for the Hollywood western with this archetypal story of a lonely warrior who arrives in a lawless township. In hundreds of westerns, this character would be 'the fastest gun', but Sanjuro, the character Toshiro Mifune so engagingly plays here, would be better described as 'the swiftest swordsman'. The people in this particular town are far from law-abiding. They consist of two rival gangs, each one as bad as the other, and a few honest citizens simply trying to get along. When Sanjuro arrives he quickly demonstrates his expertise with the sword so that each side is eager to hire him. The main difference between Mifune's character and that of western heroes like Gary Cooper or Alan Ladd is that Yojimbo is a mercenary – he's in it for the money. If the plot sounds familiar it's because, just



three years later, in 1964, Sergio Leone 'borrowed' it (without acknowledgment) for the first of his celebrated Clint Eastwood westerns, *Per un pugno di dollari* (*A Fistful of Dollars*). A comparison of key scenes from the two films will show that Leone followed Kurosawa pretty faithfully, including inserting some of the smaller details. *Yojimbo* was so successful that Kurosawa made a sequel, *Sanjuro*, the following year.

### **HIGH AND LOW (1963)**

**An Ed McBain thriller (*King's Ransom*) is transformed into an epic moral tale in which a man is faced with a terrible dilemma when his son is kidnapped.** Toshiro Mifune stars as Gondo, a wealthy businessman who lives in a fine house on top of a hill overlooking the city. He's about to swing a deal that will make him very rich when he receives a message to say that his small son has been kidnapped – and an unrealistically high ransom is being demanded for his safe return. But the boy is safe: it was Gondo's chauffeur's son who was kidnapped by mistake. So the question is asked: is the son of a chauffeur worth the same as the son of a businessman? Using the 'Scope ratio with his usual brilliance, Kurosawa divides the film into two distinct parts, parts that are aptly described by the film's title. The first half of the film unfolds inside the house on the hill, as Gondo agonises over what to do. The second takes place down in the city where people like the kidnapper live in abject poverty – the film is sometimes known in English as *Heaven and Hell*. Like Hitchcock, Kurosawa isn't interested in making a whodunnit or a mystery: for him the question is why?

### **RED BEARD (1965)**

**A young doctor becomes intern at a public clinic and learns life lessons from the title character, a man who believes in personal sacrifice for the common good.** During the two-year production of this film – filming took longer than any Japanese film up to that time, including *Seven Samurai* – Kurosawa announced that he "wanted to push the confines of movie-making to their limits." How he attempts this makes *Red Beard* one of his most challenging films. It's the story of a young man (Yuzo Kayama) who becomes intern to the veteran doctor known as Red Beard (Toshiro Mifune) who runs a public clinic. It's the doctor's view that personal sacrifice for the common good is what makes a man's life worthwhile; that only by complete dedication to the poor and needy can a doctor find fulfilment. In this sense, the film has some thematic connections to *Living*, but the film delves further into the subject, suggesting that the old doctor's feudal attitudes are becoming less relevant yet no modern doctrine is yet of sufficient value to take their place. The film's powerful philosophical and ethical elements suggest that Kurosawa was, in a way, making a summation of his life's work with this film – it proved to be his last film with Mifune and his last film in black and white.

### **KAGEMUSHA (1980)**

**At the time, the most expensive Japanese film ever made, this epic unfolds during a period of clan warfare, and questions the very nature of power.** Kurosawa only made two films during the 1970s, and one of those was made in the Soviet Union. He was finding it extremely difficult to raise finance in Japan, and it was only with the support of two American admirers – George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola – that he managed to make *Kagemusha*, which was at the time the most expensive Japanese film ever produced. Again, the setting is the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the period of clan wars, and the background to the story is basically true. When clan chief Shingen Takeda (Tatsuya Nakadai) is fatally wounded he persuades the clan's hierarchy to replace him secretly with a *kagemusha* (or double), also played by Nakadai, a thief who was spared the gallows because he bears an uncanny resemblance to Takeda. In this film, Kurosawa is examining the meaning of power. The enemy *believes* that the powerful Takeda is still in control, but the reality is very different; yet as long as the subterfuge works, the dead clan leader's power remains in place. The battle scenes are magnificently staged, but the director leaves viewers in no doubt of his attitude towards the madness of war and in particular the pointlessness of this kind of internecine conflict.

### **RAN (1985)**

**Kurosawa's last great epic is a re-working of 'King Lear' with sons replacing the original's daughters. The battle scenes are magnificently staged with impressive use of colour.** Like *Kagemusha*, *Ran* was only able to be financed with help from abroad, in this case France. Kurosawa's



last great epic film, this, like so many of his other films, is set in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century – but this time the director has drawn, once again, on Shakespeare for his inspiration, and the story is a re-working of ‘King Lear’, with the three daughters of the original replaced by three sons. Keeping the bare bones of the original, Kurosawa once again revels both in the pageantry and colour of his battle scenes and in the personal tragedies of the characters involved in what is obviously a pointless conflict. The word ‘ran’ means ‘war’ or sometimes ‘conflict’, but Kurosawa said at the time he was reaching back to the word’s older meaning – ‘chaos’. It’s a pessimistic film in which the director’s constant theme – the difficulty of upholding human values – results in apocalyptic destruction. Of particular interest is the character of the Fool, who is played by Peter [Shinnosuke Ikehata], who at the time was well known as a cross dresser and singer. Again, Tatsuya Nakadai plays the leading role, that of the elderly ruler whose plans for transition to the next generation are foiled by greed and stupidity.