

Blu-ray Review: Hideo Gosha's Viscerally Entertaining 'Three Outlaw Samurai'

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CHICAGO – Hideo Gosha's spectacularly entertaining 1964 feature directorial debut, "Three Outlaw Samurai," is a samurai film for moviegoers who aren't necessarily fans of the samurai genre. At a running time of 93 minutes, the picture is briskly paced and packed with suspenseful set-pieces, while centering its narrative on a partnership between three men who could easily be dubbed, "Good," "Bad" and "Ugly."

Though the film essentially functions as a prequel to Gosha's Japanese television show of the same name, moviegoers won't need any familiarity with the material to get immediately caught up in the action. Tadashi Sakai's in-your-face cinematography often slants to a diagonal angle while closing in on the agonized faces of foes as they fight to the death. When the sword meets flesh, Gosha doesn't spare the audience of the blood that follows.



Blu-ray Rating: **4.0/5.0**

Tetsurô Tamba, a veteran actor memorably featured in Masaki Kobayashi's classic, "Harakiri," and the James Bond vehicle, "You Only Live Twice," stars as roving samurai Sakon Shiba. His daily routine consists of walking into a mess, sizing up the situation and quickly taking sides. The film opens as Shiba comes upon a mill occupied by a rebellious band of peasants. They've kidnapped Aya (Miyuki Kuwano), the daughter of a loathsome magistrate, with the hope that it will force their corrupt leader to agree to a petition of reform. The task of defeating these gape-mouthed men while rescuing the distressed damsel would be a cinch for Shiba, but his belief in the peasants' cause inspires him to join in the battle.

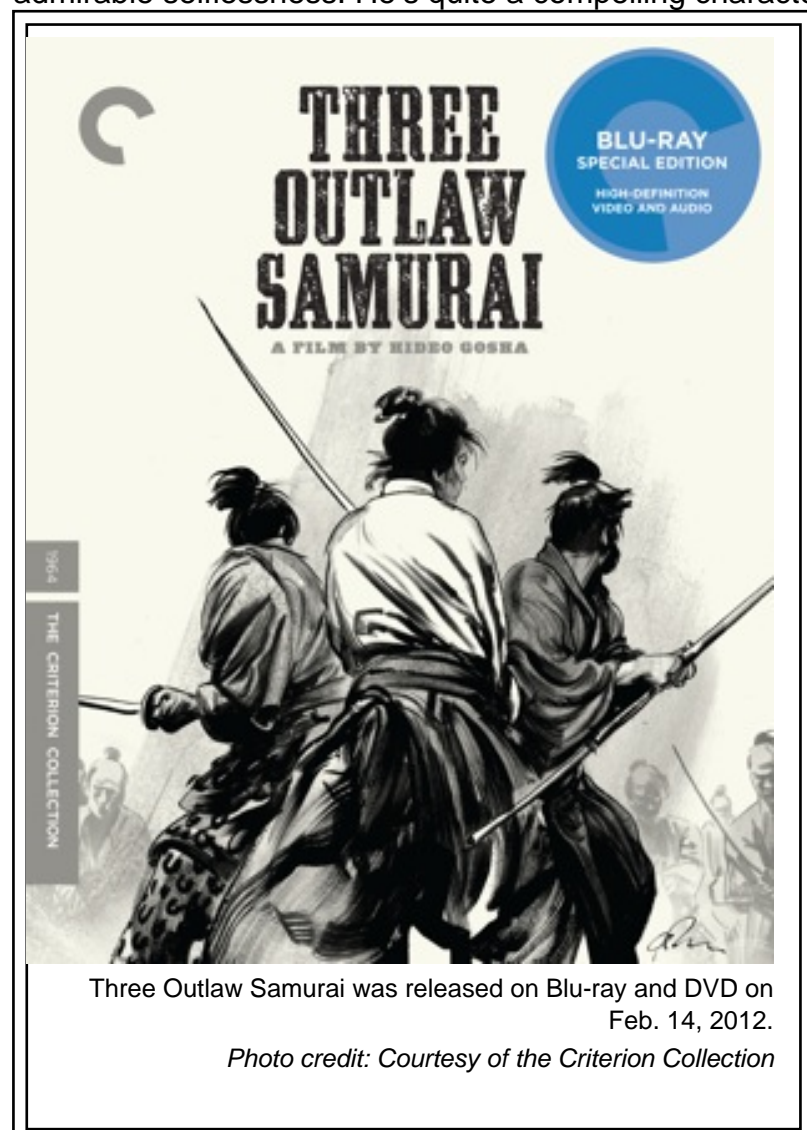


Tetsurô Tamba, Isamu Nagato and Mikijiro Hira star in Hideo Gosha's Three Outlaw Samurai.

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Criterion Collection

So desperate is the magistrate to squash the rebellion that he assigns an imprisoned samurai, Kyôjûrô Sakura (Isamu Nagato), to go after Shiba. Sakura may look like a cuddly, Yoda-like comic relief, but his fighting skills prove to be as fierce and deadly as those of men twice his size. He's also deeply remorseful when a split-second decision results in someone else's tragic misfortune. There's little suspense over whether he'll team up with Shiba, but the same can't be said of Einosuke Kikyô (Mikijirô Hira, recently seen in Takashi Miike's gem, "13 Assassins"), a samurai who enjoys taking full advantage of the comfortable life given to him by the magistrate.

Like Eli Wallach in Sergio Leone's landmark spaghetti western, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," Nagato steals the show, partly because his character is the most conflicted, grounded and multi-layered of the trio. The heroes often find themselves faced with moral quandaries, but Sakura is the only one who gives them pause. At one point, he's forced to decide whether to betray his friends or save the life of the woman for whom he has fallen. The way in which he manages to narrowly avoid both dire outcomes is a testament to Sakura's quick-thinking and admirable selflessness. He's quite a compelling character and Nagato's performance is a showstopper.



As much as I love and treasure the Criterion label, I fear that it has a tendency to scare off prospective viewers who don't regard themselves as serious cinephiles. In many ways, Gosha's film is as accessible and effortlessly enjoyable as any mainstream entertainment, and the director's deep-seated cynicism about supposed heroism still feels refreshingly modern. Only after refusing to obey orders are the samurai able to regain their honor. And though they risk everything to help the peasants acquire justice, that doesn't mean the peasants will muster the courage to defend their own rights.

Gosha's depiction of violence is as raw and honest as his subject matter, but it never veers into exploitation. When one character is whipped for what seems like an eternity, Gosha wisely leaves the carnage off-camera, resulting in a sequence far more disturbing than the much-ballyhooed bloodbath in "Passion of the Christ." There's also a wildly funny line that's delivered during a battle scene where Shiba is approached by a guilt-ridden Sakura. It's the sort of line that would go by unnoticed in any standard American blockbuster, but in a '60s-era samurai drama, it's hilarious. When the tearful Sakura runs at his friend while wailing, "Kill me! Kill me!", Shiba merely quips, "I'm busy at the moment."

The film is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.78:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by a new English subtitle translation and unfortunately offers no extras aside from a trailer and an essay by critic Bilge Ebiri. The trailer labels the picture as a controversial "new kind of period piece" and includes footage of Gosha entering the frame in order to make onset adjustments. Ebiri notes similarities between Gosha and another nihilistic master of cinema, Sam Peckinpah.

'Three Outlaw Samurai' is released by The Criterion Collection and stars Tetsurô Tamba, Isamu Nagato, Mikijiro Hira, Miyuki Kuwano, Yoshiko Kayama, Kyoko Aoi and Kamatari Fujiwara. It was written by Keiichi Abe, Hideo Gosha and Eizaburo Shiba and directed by Hideo Gosha. It was released on Feb. 14, 2012. It is not rated.



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