

Blu-Ray Review: Criterion Edition of Akira Kurosawa's Legendary 'Kagemusha'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on August 20, 2009 - 8:43am

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CHICAGO – Now that he is widely recognized as one of the best filmmakers of all time, it's almost hard to believe that there was a period in the career of Akira Kurosawa when he couldn't get financing to make a film. Kurosawa went through a very dark time in the '70s, punctuated by his disastrous experience with "Tora! Tora! Tora!," and needed the weight of Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas to help with his comeback, "Kagemusha," now available in a beautiful Criterion Collection Blu-Ray release.



Blu-Ray Rating: **4.5/5.0**

I adore stories like the one behind the making of "Kagemusha" because they reflect the ripple throughout the ages that comes with amazing creativity. In the excellent special feature, "Lucas, Coppola, and Kurosawa," the interviews draw a definitive line from John Ford (whose "The Searchers" influenced Kurosawa) to Kurosawa's work to "The Godfather" to "Star Wars" to "Kagemusha," which itself inspired countless filmmakers. The magic of movies is contagious.

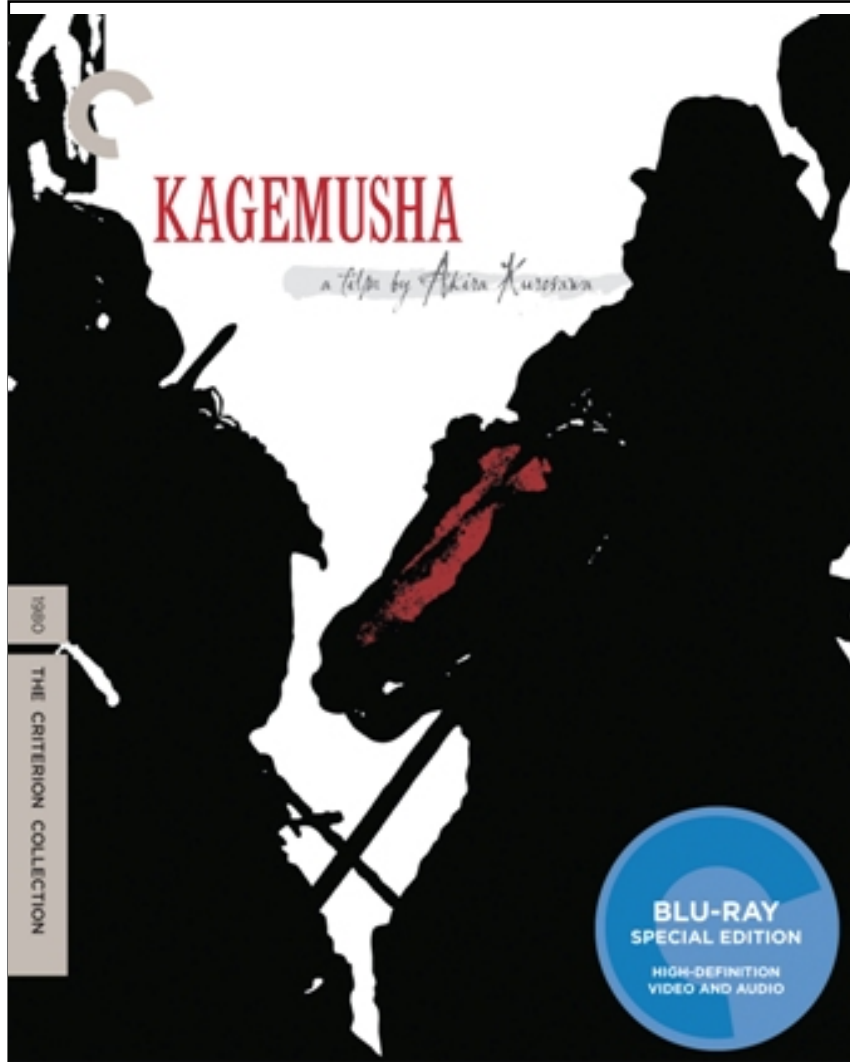


Kagemusha was released on Blu-Ray on August 18th, 2009.

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Criterion Collection

After the commercial failure of "Dodes'ka-den" and the irascible reputation that followed him after "Red Beard," Kurosawa started to struggle with financial support in the '70s. When he was forced to back out of "Tora! Tora! Tora!" due to creative differences, he carried with him a

reputation that made funding difficult. He reportedly attempted suicide in 1971, had an awful experience on "Dersu Uzala," and was reduced to going back to one of his loves, painting. The art that came out of that period would eventually turn into "Kagemusha".



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Photo credit: Courtesy of the Criterion Collection

Of course, as impossible as he reportedly was to work with, Kurosawa was still a master. Without even asking to see a script, George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola, two of the men most inspired by Kurosawa's work, put their financial weight behind whatever he wanted to do next. They recognized that Kurosawa was a filmmaker who never should have been denied funding just on the chance that he might produce another "Seven Samurai," "Yojimbo," or "Rashomon".

What he did produce was the introduction to the final chapter of his career, one marked more by bright colors and epic storytelling. "Kagemusha" finds its creator returning to the samurai story but with a much more cynical, dark worldview. It's the anti-hero story, taking the least "samurai-esque" character and turning him into the hero.

A warlord dies and a peasant thief is called upon to impersonate the leader to keep warring factions from knowing of the kingdom's weakness. The new leader is haunted by the spirit of the old one and Kurosawa continues to play with a regular theme of his career - what is real and what is illusion.

The plot of "Kagemusha" is interesting but it's primarily a stunning visual experience. There are shots in "Kagemusha" that stand among the best of the '80s. In particular, a shot of men marching through fog as orange light and shadows play in the background (at around the 20-minute mark) is one of my favorite shots of all time.



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"Kagemusha" doesn't just resemble a cinematic painting. It was designed as a moving piece of art. The 44-minute video piece reconstructing "Kagemusha" through Kurosawa's paintings and sketches called "Image: Kurosawa's Continuity" shows an artist who did a lot more than just storyboard. An included booklet of essays and artwork that inspired the film would be enough of a collector's item for Kurosawa fans to justify a purchase of the entire release.

The film itself has been restored with a high-definition digital transfer and a DTS-HD Master Audio 4.0 soundtrack. The image looks appropriately transferred. I was concerned it would be overly polished, taking away a lot of the original appeal of the film by making it look too plastic in HD. That has not happened.

Unmentioned special features include a commentary by Kurosawa scholar Stephen Prince, a 41-minute documentary on the making of the film, Suntory Whiskey commercials made on the set of "Kagemusha," a gallery of storyboards painted by Kurosawa and images of their realization on-screen, and theatrical trailers and teasers.

Very few filmmakers are as essential to a viewer's understanding of the history of the medium as Akira Kurosawa. There are millions of people out there who love "Star Wars" and "The Godfather". Find one who hasn't even heard of Kurosawa and tell them the story of how their favorite filmmakers were essential in the comeback of a master. Pass the creative spark along.

'Kagemusha' is released by The Criterion Collection and stars Tatsuya Nakadai, Tsutomu Yamazaki, and Kenichi Hagiwara. It was written by Akira Kurosawa & Masato Ide and directed by Kurosawa. The Blu-Ray was released on August 18th, 2009. It is not rated.



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