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VOICE WITHOUT A SHADOW

Kagenaki koe

Seijun Suzuki, 1958

Released 22 October 1958

CAST

Yôko Minamida as Asako
Hideaki Nitani as Ishikawa
Nobuo Kaneko as Kawai
Toshio Takahara as Kotani
Shinsuke Ashida as Muraoka
Jô Shishido as Hamazaki

CREW

Directed by **Seijun Suzuki**
Produced by **Kaneo Iwai**
Written by **Ryûta Akimoto** and **Susumu Saji**
Based on the story "Voice" by **Seichô Matsumoto**
Music by **Hikaru Hayashi**
Director of Photography **Kazue Nagatsuka**
Edited by **Akira Suzuki**
Production Design by **Takeharu Sakaguchi**

VOICES BEHIND THE SHADOW

by Stuart Galbraith IV

Unique among his generation of Japanese filmmakers, Seijun Suzuki (b. 1923) was a rascal, a charlatan, and a self-styled eccentric. Exemplifying the Japanese proverb *Deru kugi wa utareru*, “The nail that sticks out shall be hammered down,” Suzuki was also the nail that Nikkatsu Studios president Kyusaku Hori tried bludgeoning with a sledgehammer. During the ‘60s Suzuki’s super-stylized, surrealist genre masterpieces – hallucinogenic movies like *Gate of Flesh* (1964), *Tattooed Life* (1965), and especially *Tokyo Drifter* (1966) and *Branded to Kill* (1967) – were a constant thorn in Hori’s side. He accused Suzuki of making unprofitable, “incomprehensible” movies and, ultimately, illegally fired him.

Though Suzuki was completely unknown outside Japan until the 1980s, with a following that really didn’t kick in until the late 1990s – Suzuki, for instance, is completely shut out of Donald Richie and Joseph L. Anderson’s essential *The Japanese Film – Art and Industry*, even in its 1982 expanded edition – the filmmaker’s subsequent breach of contract lawsuit of the late 1960s/early ‘70s became a *cause célèbre* within Japan, with most cinema industry guilds, student film groups, and movie magazines rallying to his side. He eventually won his case, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. Testimony exposed Nikkatsu’s crippling debts (about \$5.1 million) and probably hastened its collapse as a mainstream movie studio, while Suzuki, ridiculed for his eccentricities (including never bathing or changing his clothes during production), received less than one-seventh the damages he sought (in the end, about \$36,000) and was effectively blacklisted by the struggling industry left standing.

Suzuki didn’t make another movie for ten years and, when he did, it was an oddball rumination of fame on the woman’s golf circuit (!). *A Tale of Sorrow and Sadness* flopped, but Suzuki’s next film, the even more bizarre *Zigeunerweisen* (1980), was widely hailed. Initially deemed unreleasable – not to mention *unsayable*, at least by non-German-speaking moviegoers – it eventually won Best Film and Best Director prizes at the Japanese Academy Awards, arguably as much to punish Akira Kurosawa for having shamed Toho into backing the big-budget *Kagemusha* as to honor Suzuki.

By the time I first met him, in March 1997, Suzuki had embraced and was indeed actively cultivating an impish anarchist image. His hair wispy white with matching goatee, playful eyes hid behind browline glasses, Suzuki looked like a dapper Buddhist monk or maybe Japan’s answer to Colonel Sanders, and he delighted in never giving a straight answer to even the simplest questions posed by journalists, cinema historians, and during audience Q & As following screenings of his revived movies.

“Life is already crazy,” he’d sign autographs, “So why not be crazy yourself?”

When western world critics discovered directors like Seijun Suzuki, it was very nearly always with no inkling of industrial context. He had that appealing agitator reputation of his, and many wrongly assumed the intense stylization of his most famous films was unique. But a wider sampling of other genre films from directors of Suzuki’s generation reveals that, while he was certainly a

firebrand and uniquely confrontational with his bosses, Suzuki was hardly alone if ahead of the curve in pushing genre movies to new heights.

This might sound like a criticism, but really it's more of an acknowledgement of the dozens of other Suzuki-level directors out there, with so much their equally exciting output still waiting to be rediscovered.

And that's a big part of what makes Arrow's Nikkatsu Diamond Guys series so welcome. It offers a chance to experience filmmakers like Suzuki *before* self-consciousness took over, when Suzuki was just one among dozens of 20- and 30-something directors churning out made-to-order genre fare. Unique in all the world, their youth energized and jazzed-up even the most mundane genre fare. For a time in Japanese cinema, roughly the late 1940s through the early 1970s, such vibrant creativity was absolutely commonplace. Even throwaway, bottom-of-the-bill potboilers tend to play as fresh today as they did more than half a century ago – a sharp contrast to the profoundly unimaginative Japanese movies being made today, movies which with very few exceptions never take any chances at all.

Nikkatsu may be Japan's oldest major film company, but when Suzuki joined the company back in the mid-1950s, Nikkatsu was regarded as something of a young upstart, resuming production after a long, wartime-induced absence. The company survived distributing Hollywood films but, quickly realizing that homegrown movies were more popular, built eight modern soundstages (complete with air conditioning, an unimaginable luxury the other majors lacked) on the Tama River, a stone's throw from their former lodgings, occupied by Daiei since that company's hostile takeover during the war.

Japan's other film studios – Toho, Shochiku, Daiei, Shintoho, and the comparatively new Toei – were not happy about Nikkatsu's resurrection, particularly the dysfunctional Shintoho, from whom Nikkatsu ensnared much top talent. Suzuki, meanwhile, was a young assistant director lured away from Shochiku at three times the salary and with the promise of fast-track promotions to the director's chair. Indeed, Suzuki made his directorial debut less than two years after joining the company, something unthinkable anywhere else, especially at Shochiku, where 16 colleagues stood ahead of him in line.

As was commonplace for neophyte directors, Suzuki's earliest films – still credited under his birth name, Seitaro Suzuki – were short, bottom-of-the-bill featurettes made to order. His first, *Victory Is Mine* (also known as *Harbor Toast – Victory Is In Our Grasp*, 1954), a 65-minute love story-gangster film, was primarily a vehicle built around a song on Japan's Hit Parade. (At a Suzuki retrospective at the Nuart Theater in West Los Angeles, the wily filmmaker dismissed these earliest pictures – after all, they didn't jibe at all with his image – but in fact they are all pretty entertaining on their own terms.)

Suzuki was 31 when he transferred to Nikkatsu, the same age Akira Kurosawa was when he fast-tracked to the director's chair supervising much of Kajiro Yamamoto's *Horse* (1941). Born in Tokyo,





it was assumed Suzuki would take over his father's bicycle bell-making business, but wartime service beginning in December 1943 and Suzuki's harrowing experiences in the Philippines and Taiwan altered his worldview – especially after a ship he was serving on was sunk and Suzuki drifted for several days before being rescued.

Voice Without a Shadow (1958) was Suzuki's tenth movie, an adaptation of esteemed mystery writer Seicho Matsumoto's (1909-1992) famous short story "Voice." Earlier that year KRT, the not-quite three-year-old Tokyo television station soon to become the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) network, broadcast its own adaptation of Matsumoto's yarn in two half-hour parts. After Suzuki's film, three more TV versions of the durable story followed during 1959-62, each time on a different network.

While one shouldn't expect much in the way of trademark Suzuki flourishes and concerns, it's a typically fine workmanlike adaptation, the sort of thing one came to expect of Nikkatsu product, and it offers many interesting glimpses of everyday (and not so everyday) life in early postwar Japan. A visit to the film's "Bar Owl," for instance, notes that a highball back then would set one back 50 yen, all of 14 cents, or 9p.

The first half of the story concerns Asako Takahashi (Yoko Minamida), switchboard operator for the *Maicho Shimbun* ("Every Morning Newspaper") who, on behalf of reporter Ishikawa (Hideaki Nitani), places a call to a Professor Akaboshi at Tokyo University. However, Asako misdials, connecting instead to a crematory where she hears the sinister if amused voice of a man who later turns out to be the prime suspect in a murder there.

Three years later Asako is unhappily married to Kotani (Toshio Takahara), a long-unemployed man who seems to have last found steady work. Dreams of her husband's stable employment are quickly dashed when he begins hosting *mahjong* gambling parties dominated by yakuza blackmailer Hamazaki (a Brylcreemed Joe Shishido, then just 24 and billed sixth in the credits), who takes the husband, pharmacist Kawaii (*Battles Without Honor and Humanity's* Nobuo Kaneko), and pool hall owner Muraoka (Shinsuke Ashida) to the cleaners every night, and in Kotani's case, to the tune of \$500/month. Worse, Asako recognizes Hamazaki as the same voice she heard on that terrifying phone call three years earlier. (It doesn't help matters that Kotani treats Asako like a typical Japanese housewife, either, barking orders like, "Asako – tea!" amidst these home-wrecking games.)

Women in Japanese crime films rarely got top billing, but Yoko Minamida does here, even though she disappears into the background during the picture's second half, as nosy reporter Nitani takes over the narrative. Minamida got her start as a Daiei Studios "New Face," playing supporting parts in several high profile assignments for director Kenji Mizoguchi, including in *The Crucified Lovers* (1954) and *Princess Yang Kwei-fei* (1956). She was among the hungry young talent lured away to Nikkatsu, and within a year she starred (with top billing for the first time) in Nikkatsu's seminal *Season of the Sun* (1956), the first of the "sun tribe" genre films about disaffected youth and featuring the first-ever film appearance of Nikkatsu's future Number 1 movie star, Yujiro Ishihara (and brother of future Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara, upon whose novel this was based). But, personally, Minamida was

more interested in her leading man, actor Hiroyuki Nagato, with whom she would eventually marry, in 1961, the same year they starred in Shohei Imamura's New Wave classic *Pigs and Battleships*.

But that was just one of at least 13 movies in which they appeared together. Other joint appearances include Shohei Imamura's first film, *Stolen Desire* (1958), Masahiro Makino's *Japanese Yakuza* (1964), the Sonny Chiba-directed *Yellow Fangs* (1990), and Nobuhiko Obayashi's *Song of Goodbye* (2006), her last film. Other memorable films include Kinji Fukasaku's *Jakoman and Tetsu* (1964), Noboru Nakamura's *Portrait of Chieko* (1967), and Obayashi's *House* (1977).

Soon after the release of *Song of Goodbye*, Minamida, at age 74, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, a condition that had been suspected as early as 2004. The couple, married nearly half a century, went public with her condition, allowing a television documentary film crew to unblinkingly record her slipping away while her old husband did his best to care for her. Having been a typical Japanese husband of his generation – drinking and carousing into the wee hours of the morning most nights – Nagato was actually grateful “that God has given me the chance to take care of her.” She died in October 2009. Nagato, who published a book about his experiences, *Wait for Me, Yoko*, himself died a year-and-a-half later.

One-third of Nikkatsu's “Diamond Guys” triumvirate, Hideaki Nitani (1930-2012) is by far the least known in the west. Born in Kyoto, he attended that city's prestigious Doshisha University and its Department of Letters but quit before graduating to become an announcer and talk show moderator at age 24 for Sasebo Radio (later Nagasaki Broadcasting Company), including some English-language broadcasts. That eventually led to a contract at Nikkatsu in 1956, the third year of its New Face program. (Also joining that year: Akira Kobayashi.) His working class tough guy roles led to the unflattering (at least in English) nickname “Dump Truck Guy.” Later, however, Nitani became more famous – and better-suited – playing the lifelong friend or rival of the co-lead.

Alternating between starring roles, second leads, and guest-star appearances, Nitani's credits include Koreyoshi Kurahara's exceptional Japanese noir *I Am Waiting* (1957) and *Sun in the Last Days of the Shogunate* (1957), Yuzo Kawashima's comedy considered one of the greatest Japanese movies ever but virtually unknown outside Japan.

Nitani got on with Suzuki; they did nine movies together including *Voice Without a Shadow*, *Eight Hours of Terror*, *Inn of the Floating Weeds*, *The Naked Woman and the Gun* (all 1957), *Underworld Beauty*, *Young Breasts*, *Spring Never Came* (both 1958), and *The Man with the Hollow-Tip Bullets* (1961) all came early in Suzuki's career, but he brought Nitani back to co-star with Tetsuya Watari in *Tokyo Drifter* (1966), maybe Suzuki's best film.

In the meantime, Nikkatsu kept Nitani busy, like all movie stars of his generation, the actor appearing in an astounding 22 movies in 1958 alone.

In 1964 Nitani married Toho actress Yumi Shirakawa, best known in the west for her starring roles in two Ishiro Honda-Eiji Tsuburaya-directed extravaganzas: *Rodan* (1956) and *The Mysterians*

(1957), two films Shirakawa would just as soon forget. Nonetheless, it was probably Shirakawa who gave Nitani the go-ahead for the actor to star as Commanding Officer Hachiro Atami in Eiji Tsuburaya's elaborate, special effects-crammed television series *Mighty Jack*, a 13-episode, live-action response to Gerry and Sylvia Anderson's internationally popular *Thunderbirds*. (Some sources credit Nitani with an appearance in another Honda-Tsuburaya *kaiju eiga*, 1965's *Frankenstein Conquers the World*, but this is incorrect.) That same year Nitani even guest-starred in two episodes of a West German television series, *Police Radio Calls* (*Polizeifunk ruft*).

Nitani remained at Nikkatsu long enough to put in an appearance in Satsuo Yamamoto's epic *Men and War* (1970), one of the company's last big releases, then went freelance, appearing in Toei's *Gang Warfare* (1972) and Toho's epic disaster film *The Submersion of Japan* (1973). But Nitani became best known in his later years as the star of the popular police detective series *Special Investigation Vanguard* (1977-87). Two seasons in Nitani fractured his neck in a skiing accident while filming in Hokkaido and was off the show recovering for four months. Through the series Nitani also became closely linked to that show's sponsor, Nissan, and its line of Cedric cars.

Their daughter, Yurie Nitani, herself became an '80s-era television actress, and later a respected businesswoman and company president of Trygroup, Inc., a tutoring provider servicing one million Japanese students. Hideaki suffered a stroke in 2003, after spending most of the past decade on charity work and actors union activism. He died of pneumonia in January 2012, a few weeks shy of his 82nd birthday.

Voice Without a Shadow – Just what voices *do* have shadows, anyway? – faintly hints at Suzuki's surrealist-absurdist flourishes. A flashback montage offers up a chicken being plucked, the apparent strangling of a dog, and a woman in her underwear, after all, and Suzuki and cinematographer Kazue Nagatsuka haul out that old standby of noir thrillers, the Dutch angle.

More significant though in *Voice Without a Shadow* is the presence of composer Hikaru Hayashi, soon to write many of Japan's finest film scores, 22 for director Kaneto Shindo alone, among them *The Lucky Dragon No. 5* (1959), *The Naked Island* (1960), *Onibaba* (1964), and *Kuroneko* (1968); and four for Nagisa Oshima, including *Violence at Noon* (1966) and *Death by Hanging* (1968). Hayashi also wrote film music for Zenzo Matsuyama's *Happiness of Us Alone* (1961), Yasuzo Masumura's *Blind Beast* (1969), Kinji Fukasaku's *Under the Flag of the Rising Sun* (1972), and many others. When he did *Voice without a Shadow*, Hayashi was a relative neophyte, scoring films for just two years.

Born in Tokyo 1931, Hayashi never completed his studies at the Tokyo University of the Arts, but that didn't hinder a prolific and much acclaimed output that, in addition to 100-plus film scores included more than 30 operas (among them works based on Shakespeare, Chekhov, Kafka, and Cervantes), chamber music, popular songs, choral and symphonic works and nearly two dozen books. In September 2011 he took a bad fall in front of his house and never recovered, dying in hospital the following January.

Voice Without a Shadow was Nikkatsu's 67th of 84 releases in 1958, the lower half of a double-bill headlined by Kenjiro Morinaga's now totally forgotten *Lighthouse Farewell*, starring Kyoji Aoyama and Minako Kotsuki. Needless to say, *Voice Without a Shadow* was not among the four Nikkatsu movies that made it into that year's Top Ten list at the box office. (Tomotaka Tasaka's *Slope of the Sun* ranked second in 1958, followed by Ko Nakahira's *Crimson Wing* at No. 3, Umetsugu Inoue's *Tomorrow Is Another Day* at No. 6, and Koreyoshi Kurahara's *A Man Who Rode the Typhoon* at No. 7. Daiei's all-star *Chushingura* earned the top spot.) Nor did *Voice Without a Shadow* win any awards.

As for Suzuki, he toiled away at Nikkatsu through 17 more movies before making his breakthrough work, *Youth of the Beast* (1963), whose routine script about a disgraced detective (Jo Shishido) infiltrating a yakuza gang by posing as a hitman was compensated by Suzuki's visual flamboyance. Nevertheless, Suzuki in interviews always insisted he was never trying to be that nail sticking out, that he stringently adhered to studio policy, never had any influence over such issues as casting, and that he was a just a director of made-to-order program pictures, doing the work assigned to him.

Nevertheless, a steady stream of retrospectives abroad during the '90s/early-2000s and, oddly enough, acting roles back in Japan (including, reportedly, modest fame as the patriarch on a *Dallas*-like Japanese TV drama) brought him the kind of renewed cache that allowed for several final "comebacks," notably *Pistol Opera* (2001), a semi-sequel-cum-remake of *Branded to Kill*, and *Princess Raccoon* (2005) before emphysema and old age forced a permanent retirement. Jim Jarmusch, whose great films spawned many bad Japanese-made imitators, paid tribute to Suzuki in *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999), dedicating the picture to the once-disgraced master.

And, arguably, in 2016 more Seijun Suzuki movies are available throughout the world than any other Japanese genre filmmaker. Life is crazy indeed.

Stuart Galbraith IV is the author of *The Emperor and the Wolf – The Lives and Films of Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune and Japanese Cinema*. His audio commentaries include Arrow Video's *Battles without Honor and Humanity* and the BFI's *Rashomon*. He lives in Kyoto, Japan with his wife and daughter.



RED PIER

Akai hatoba

Toshio Masuda, 1958

Released 23 September 1958

CAST

Yujirô Ishihara as Jirô

Mie Kitahara as Keiko

Yukiko Todoroki as Mama

Shirô Ôsaka as Detective Noro

CREW

Directed by **Toshio Masuda**

Produced by **Takiko Mizunoe**

Written by **Ichirô Ikeda** and **Toshio Masuda**

Music by **Hajime Kaburagi**

Director of Photography **Shinsaku Himeda**

Edited by **Tsuji Masanori**

Production Design by **Takeo Kimura**

TOUGH GUY, NICE GIRL, HARD CHOICE: RED PIER

by Mark Schilling

Pépé le Moko, Julien Duvivier's 1937 thriller starring Jean Gabin as a criminal hiding out from the police in the Casbah quarter of Algiers, became an often-revived favorite with Japanese audiences following its first release in Japan in 1939.

In 1958 Nikkatsu, one of the country's six major film studios, remade it as a vehicle for its biggest star, Yujiro Ishihara. A 23-year-old actor and singer with a huge teenage fan base, Ishihara was often compared to James Dean and Elvis Presley and the film, *Red Pier* (*Akai Hatoba*), became another in his long string of hits.

Directed by Toshio Masuda, then a young up-and-comer who would make a total of 25 films with Ishihara, the most of any Nikkatsu director, *Red Pier* stars Ishihara as a hitman who hides out in Kobe, a port city in Western Japan, after finishing a job in Tokyo.

Hollywood teen heartthrobs of the era played troubled or rebellious youths, with James Dean's Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) being the best known. A Gabin-like gangster, however, would have probably struck them and their handlers as an odd role choice. (In *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), Elvis played a construction worker who was sent to prison for manslaughter, but he was portrayed as a kid who made a mistake, not a career criminal.)

Nikkatsu cast Ishihara in a wide range of roles, from the ex-boxer with a dark past in Koreyoshi Kurehara's *I Am Waiting* (*Ore wa Matteiru ze*, 1957) to the quick-fisted drummer with mommy issues in Umetsugu Inoue's *The Man Who Started a Storm* (*Arashi o Yobu Otoko*, 1957). But he also made an indelible impression playing characters on the wrong side of the law, such as the ex-con bar manager with a murder on his rap sheet in Masuda's *Rusty Knife* (*Sabita Knife*, 1958), or the gangster who meets a violent end in Takashi Nomura's *Night Fog Blues* (*Yogiri Blues*, 1963).

The son of a well-off family who lived the same hedonistic lifestyle as the amoral teen he played in his break-out hit, Ko Nakahira's *Crazed Fruit* (*Kurutta Kajitsu*, 1956), Ishihara had a media image as the punkish leader of the film's so-called Sun Tribe (*Taiyo Zoku*): kids from prosperous backgrounds enjoying everything from sailing to easy sex on the Shonan Coast, a favorite summer playground of Tokyoites. He was not comfortable with this image, but it stuck until the Sun Tribe boom faded later in the decade.

Also, in 1958 Japan was just emerging the hard-scrabble postwar years, when many of the millions scrambling to survive in the economic, social and moral wreckage of Japan's defeat drifted into the bustling black market, the thriving 'water trade' (*mizushoba*) of bars and cabarets, or the omnipresent gangs that were no longer restricted by prewar codes about 'proper' gangster behavior.

Even so, these outlaws benefited from traditional tolerance for their kind, with such legendary gangsters as Kunisada Chuji and Shimizu no Jirocho viewed in the popular imagination more as Robin Hood figures than feral criminals, a view reinforced by the many movies based on their exploits.

So to a Japanese audience of 1958, Ishihara's character, Lefty Jiro, would have been a familiar type – a delinquent youth abandoned by his family (“The only face I remember is a teacher from reform school,” he says when asked about his parents) who found a home in the gangs. He tells his gang ‘brother,’ the ruthless, duplicitous Katsumata (Hideaki Nitani), “I trusted you more than my real brothers since I was a messed-up 17-year-old.” A common story for the times – and one designed to inspire audience sympathy.

At the same time, Jiro is not an object of pity. He is instead a cheeky punk who treats the ‘accidental’ death of his assigned victim – a restaurant owner turned drug dealer – as something of a joke. (“Couldn’t they do it a little cooler?” he asks his partner after they witness the victim’s off-screen death by a swinging crane.) He is also stylish, from his all-white suit to his wrap-around sunglasses, and fearless, laughing in the face of wily Detective Noro (Jiro Osaka), who suspects him of arranging the dealer’s murder and tails him relentlessly, if somewhat comically.

So though *Red Pier* was a remake, it was by no means a rip-off. Co-writing the script with novelist and scriptwriter Keiichiro Ryu, Masuda tailored the film to his free-spirited, hard-living star who was an icon to a generation, from the women who loved his long legs, then a rare feature on Japanese film actors, to the guys who admired his bad attitude though, as members of Japan’s rule-following, senior-respecting society, they usually had to copy it more in fashion gesture than lived substance.

For all its flashed pistols and tough guy posturing, *Red Pier* is less a hard-boiled action movie than a romance of star-crossed love. It is also the tragic drama of a youth-gone-wrong who, for all his misdeeds, deserves better.

The film signals Jiro’s innate goodness early on, when he selflessly rescues a child from the path of a moving taxi (though he smirks when his loyal underling, Teko (Masumi Okada), cuffs the bewildered driver). We also see this nice-guy side of him when, soon after his arrival in Kobe, he befriends a boy playing a harmonica on the docks – and gives him an impromptu music lesson.

He also aids the boy’s aunt Keiko (Mie Kitahara), who has run the harbor-side Sugita Restaurant following her brother/owner’s untimely death, in delivering an order to a ship anchored offshore.

As indicated by his love-at-first-sight stare, Jiro finds Keiko physically attractive, but quickly realizes she is a social and moral class above the women in his milieu, including his girlfriend of the moment, the brassy, clingy nightclub dancer Mami (Sanae Nakahara). He also figures out that her brother and his victim are one and the same, though that knowledge fails to cool his ardor.

Keiko is attracted to him as well, despite their constant bantering and bickering. (This on-screen romance carried over to real life: Kitahara married Ishihara in 1960 and retired from acting, though as Makiko Ishihara she has remained active in managing his estate and legacy since his death in 1987).

Obstacles to their budding relationship immediately arise, however. Mami becomes madly jealous of Keiko, though her friendship with Jiro is entirely chaste. And Noro sticks to Jiro like a leech with the intent of arresting him for the Tokyo hit, while needling him more like a wise-guy pal than a by-the-book cop. Then there is Katsumata, who decides that Jiro is more trouble than he is worth and arranges for a hitman (Hiroshi Hijikata) to take him out. Even assuming he survives all the above threats, Jiro can’t erase his role in the death of Keiko’s brother, as much as he may try to hide it.





His first impulse is to run away and start a new life, a dream that, in genre formula terms, is doomed from the start. His enemies are too smart and his love for Keiko is too strong.

Masuda, then in his early thirties, was personally close to Ishihara (“Both of us were big drinkers,” he smilingly explained to me in a 2005 interview) and framed shot after glamor shot of Jiro underlining his appeal as a tough-guy sex symbol. One memorable example is the scene of a shirtless Jiro lounging on the balcony of his Kobe hideout, with the harbor in the distance behind him, as he talks to an upset Mami of escape abroad, minus her. Another is of Jiro’s insouciantly singing the title song on a rooftop amidst lines of flapping laundry, again against a picturesque urban landscape. (The song became a hit for Ishihara and later a karaoke standard.)

Working with cameraman Shinsaku Shimeda, who became known for his collaborations with Shohei Imamura and Tatsumi Kumashiro, Masuda also visually underscored Jiro’s loneliness and isolation. Some of this is standard noir atmospheric, such as Jiro’s lonely walks by the harbor as shadows deepen and boat whistles sound or his knock-down drag-out fight with Katsumata in a darkened hotel room, as the camera tilts, neon lights flash and a floor fan whirls.

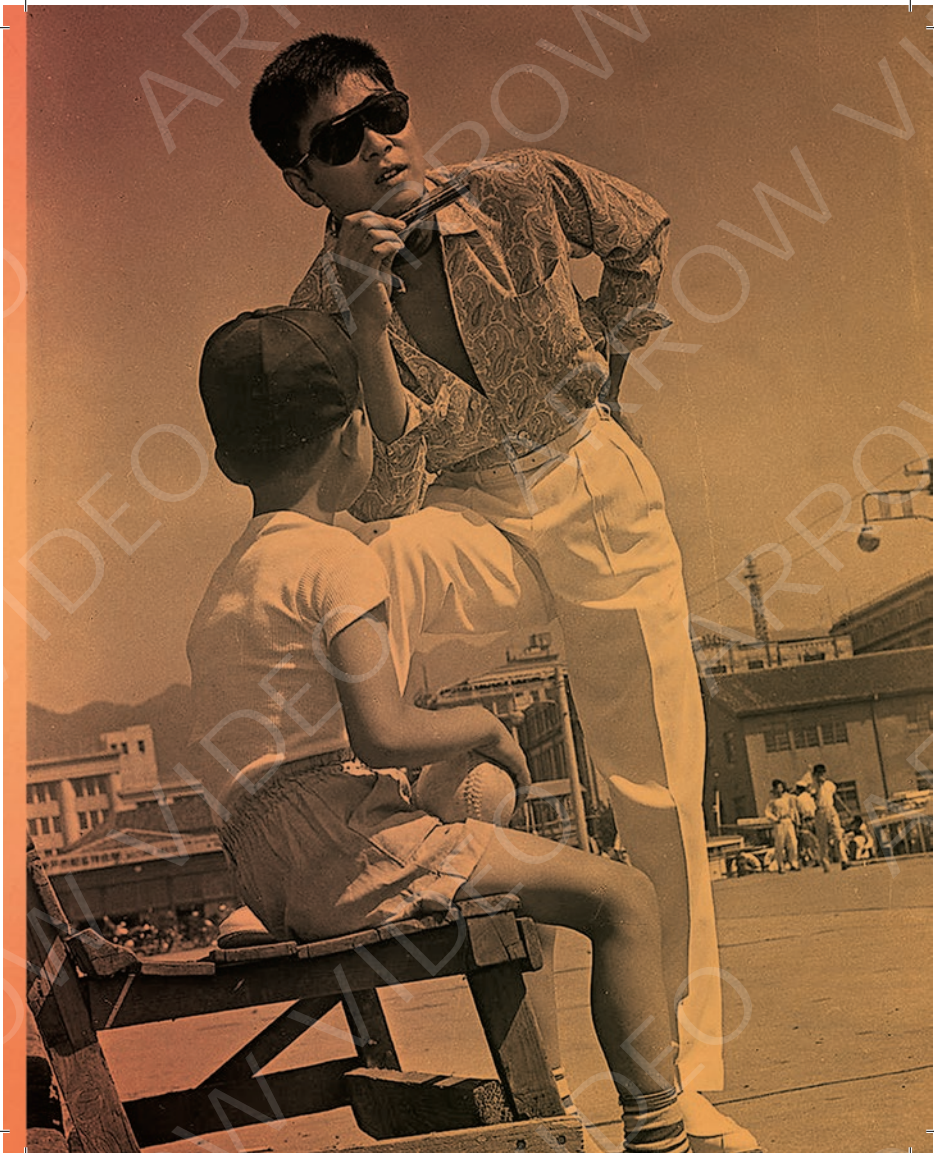
But that same camera also captures, in stark close-up, Jiro in his final moments of freedom, standing in the darkness outside a hospital window and listening to Keiko inside playing a familiar tune on a harmonica. By now he knows she has been put there as a police trap, that she plays in loving memory of him – and that he can no longer be in her life. As he withdraws, Jiro turns and sees Noro, standing and waiting a few paces away. Jiro’s expression becomes one of grim awareness – and resignation. With a faint smile, he hands over his gun and extends his hands for the cuffs.

The scene plays out wordlessly, with a pathos uncommon in the action genre, but fitting to what Masuda himself considered a *seishun eiga* (youth film). Though hardly unique to Japan, films about teenagers and young adults, with romance as a central theme, have long been a core genre in the Japanese film industry, one in which Nikkatsu specialized throughout the 1950s and 1960s, with Ishihara starring in dozens. In contrast to Hollywood, with its traditional insistence on happy endings, Japanese dramas about young love frequently end in permanent separation, with everything from social forces to terminal illness pulling the lovers apart.

This reflects a deep-rooted cultural preference, going back to the love-suicide dramas of the bunraku puppet theater and the Kabuki stage, brought up-to-date by the presence of Ishihara’s Jiro, simultaneously cool and troubled, cocky and lost. That is, a symbol of contemporary youth both aspirational (girls wanting to date him, guys wanting to be him) and cautionary (embodying the standard genre message that crime doesn’t pay).

Masuda was to remake *Red Quay* as *Velvet Hustler* (*Kurenai no Nagareboshi*), a 1967 film starring Tetsuya Watari in the Ishihara role. The film, which borrowed from Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* (*A Bout De Souffle*), replaced the earlier film’s black-and-white noir atmospheric with a bright go-go era palette, as well as a stronger emphasis on screwball sex comedy and stylish action.

In place of Mie Kitahara’s earnest restaurant proprietor, the hero’s love interest is a saucy, spoiled rich girl (Ruriko Asaoka) looking for missing jewelry. And instead of heavy machinery, Watari’s target is dispatched with a bullet shot from a speeding red convertible. Cool indeed: Jiro finally got his wish.



TOSHIO MASUDA: NIKKATSU ACTION EMPEROR

Nikkatsu's top director of action films, who worked with the studio's biggest stars while shaping genre styles, Toshio Masuda was born in Kobe in 1927, the son of a seaman. A free-spirited youth, Masuda resisted military indoctrination at a technical training school and was expelled in July 1945. He soon entered the Russian Department of the Osaka University of Foreign Studies to specialise in Russian literature. There he became a fan of French films, while attempting to master the intricacies of Russian grammar (a struggle he ultimately abandoned).

In 1949, after graduation, Masuda went to Tokyo where he studied at the Scenario Academy of the Shinto Studio. In August 1950 he joined Shinto and worked as an assistant director under Umetsugu Inoue, Nobuo Nakagawa and Mikio Naruse, while continuing to write screenplays.

At the end of 1954 Masuda followed Inoue to rival Nikkatsu, where he wrote scripts for his mentor's films, including *Lunar Eclipse (Gesshoku)*, 1957) and *The Winner (Shorisha)*, 1957) and co-wrote *The Eagle and the Hawk (Washi to Taka)*, 1957). He also worked as an assistant director on Kon Ichiwaka's *The Heart (Kokoro)*, 1955) and *The Harp of Burma (Burma no Tategoto)*, 1956). In October 1957 he was promoted to director and debuted in 1958 with *A Journey of Body and Soul (Kokoro to Niku no Tabi)*.

Masuda had his first major hit with his third film, *Rusty Knife (Sabita Knife)*, 1958). Based on a script by Shintaro Ishihara, the film starred Yujiro Ishihara and Akira Kobayashi as two *chinpira* (apprentice gangsters) who witness a murder and are pursued by the killers even after they try to go straight. The film thrilled audiences with its fast-paced mix of mystery and action, concluding in a dramatic chase involving two duelling dump trucks.

Masuda followed with *Red Pier (Akai Hatoba)*, 1958) and *The Perfect Game (Kanzen no Yugi)*, 1958), an intricately plotted thriller about college students who commit the perfect crime, with unintended consequences. Kobayashi plays the hero, torn between his conscience and the cheerful amorality of his conniving friends.

In 1959 Masuda made *Live for Today (Kyo ni Ikiru)*, a reworking of *Shane*, with Ishihara as a drifter who cleans up a rough mining town. The film laid the groundwork for the studio's trademark *Wanderer (Wataridori)* series of Eastern-Westerns starring Akira Kobayashi as a cowboy-movie-like drifter.

Masuda worked with Yujiro Ishihara again during 1959, on *The Man Who Risked Heaven and Earth (Ten to Chi o Kakeru Otoko)*, a thriller about a death-defying pilot. In all, Masuda ended up making twenty-five films with Japan's most popular star – the largest number of any Nikkatsu director and an indication of his high status in the studio pecking order. He came to be known as “Emperor Masuda of Nikkatsu.” Fellow Nikkatsu Action director Seijun Suzuki, on the other hand, never made one, though his career at the studio closely coincided timewise (if not success-wise) with Masuda's.

Among the biggest hits of the collaboration between Masuda and Ishihara was *Red Handkerchief (Akai Handkerchief)*, 1964), which starred Ishihara as a Yokohama detective who shoots and kills the father of the woman he loves, a factory girl played by Ruriko Asaoka. He quits the police force and becomes a construction worker – but the past, as well as a persistent cop played by Nobuo Kaneko, finally brings him back to Yokohama, where he tries to discover the truth of what happened that fateful day.

Key scenes, including a passionate reunion between Ishihara and Asaoka in Ishihara's seedy hotel room, have a ripe romanticism soaked in noir atmospheric that makes comparisons with *Casablanca* not absurd. *Red Handkerchief* not only set the pattern for the mood action films to come, but was also the third-highest earning Japanese film of 1964.

Another major Masuda hit was *Hana and Ryu* (*Hana to Ryu*, 1962), in which Ishihara plays a gangster who loses his passage money to Brazil gambling and, while earning it back, becomes involved with two women. Set at the end of the Meiji period (1868-1912), the film was Ishihara's first period drama and became Nikkatsu's number one hit for the year. It also was a precursor of the *ninkyō* (traditional yakuza action) genre that was to become hugely popular the following year – and remain so through most of the decade.

Masuda often worked with Akira Kobayashi, beginning with *Rusty Knife* – the film that made him a star. He also directed Kobayashi in his first leading role, as a college boy who learns about the real world's harshness in *The Perfect Game* (*Kanzen na Yugi*, 1958).

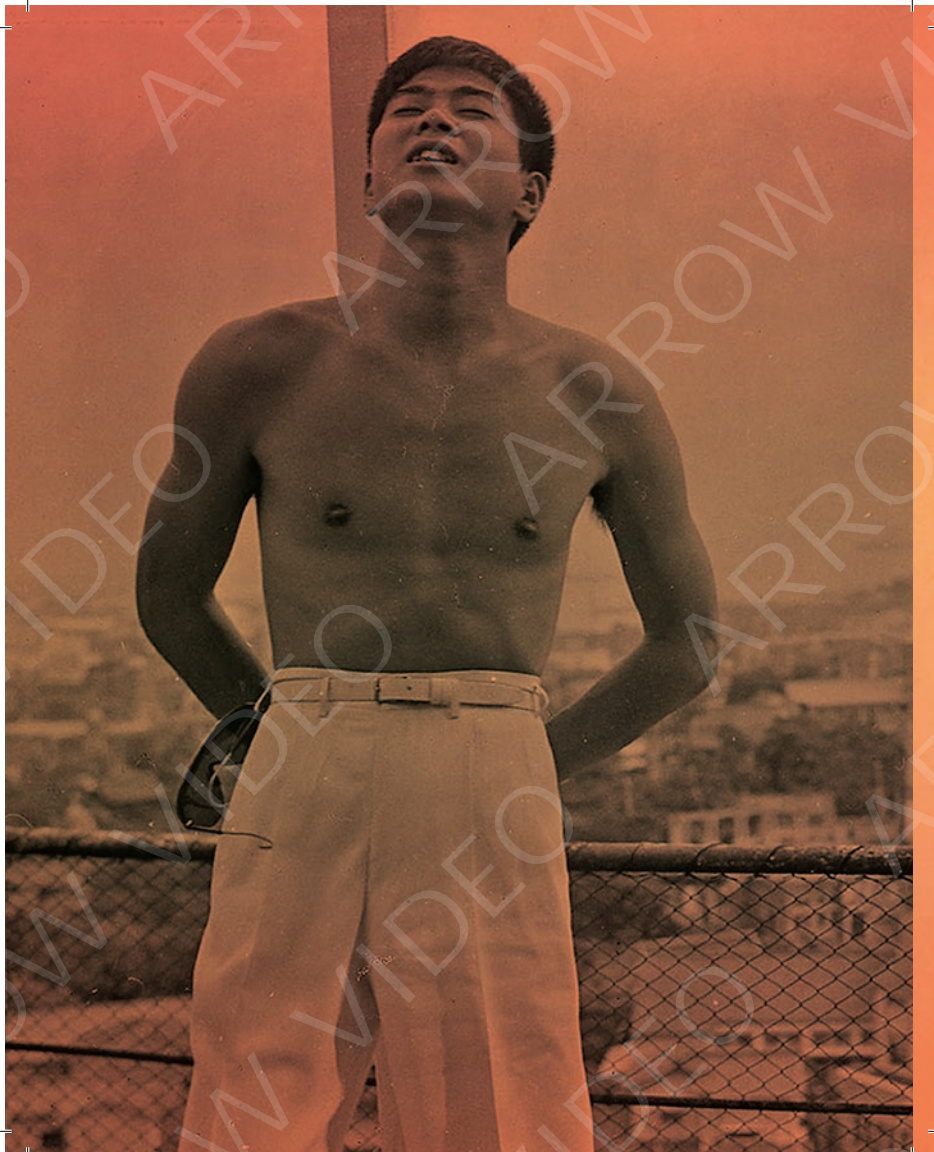
In 1967, with *Velvet Hustler* (*Kurenai no Nagareboshi*), Masuda boosted yet another Nikkatsu up-and-comer, Tetsuya Watari, to stardom. Playing a happy-go-lucky hitman hiding out in Kobe after a job, Watari trades quips and innuendos with the sharp-tongued rich girl (Ruriko Asaoka) who is supposed to be looking for her missing fiancé. A loose remake of *Red Pier*, shot with more brio and humour than the original, the film was a refreshing change of pace for both director and star.

More typical of Masuda and Watari's work together was *Gangster VIP* (*Burai Yori Daikanbu*, 1968), the first entry in the actor's signature *Hoodlum* (*Burai*) series. Based on the reminiscences of real-life yakuza Goro Fujita, the film starred Watari as a lone-wolf gangster who lives by his own code and uses a short sword as his weapon of choice. Once again Masuda delivered taut action and a riveting finale, beginning with a fight in a nightclub backroom between Watari and enemy hoods. The life-or-death struggle unfolds without the customary shouts and grunts – the only sound coming from a female singer who is crooning obliviously in the next room. The film served as a template for the Nikkatsu New Action sub-genre.

In 1968, after helming fifty-three films for Nikkatsu, Masuda became a freelancer, but continued to work steadily. In 1970, he and Kinji Fukasaku, then a maker of yakuza action films for rival Toei, directed the Japanese scenes for the 20th Century Fox World War II drama *Tora! Tora! Tora!*. They replaced Akira Kurosawa, who was fired from the project after suffering a breakdown that resulted in production delays.

Over the next two decades, with his reputation as a hitmaker firmly established, Masuda directed a series of major studio projects, including the disaster film *Catastrophe 1999: The Prophecies of Nostradamus* (*Nostradamus no Daiyogen*, 1974) and three big-budget war movies for Toei: *The Battle of Port Arthur* (*Kochi 203*, 1980), *The Great Japanese Empire* (*Dainippon Teikoku*, 1982) and *The Battle of the Sea of Japan: To Go to Sea* (*Nihonkai Daikaisen: Umi Yukeba*, 1983).

Masuda also tried his hand at other genres, making *High Teen Boogie* (1982), a teen-targeted romance about a biker who falls in love with a straight girl, and *Company Funeral* (*Shaso*, 1989), a drama about a corporate succession struggle that was selected for the *Kinema Junpo* annual Best Ten list. His most unusual project during this period were five entries in the *Space Battleship Yamato* (*Uchu Senkan Yamato*) SF/fantasy animation series (1977-1983), which he directed in collaboration with series creator Leiji Matsumoto.



Masuda's last live-action feature was the 1992 crime thriller *Heavenly Sin (Tengoku no Taiza)*, starring Omar Sharif as a Chinese mafia boss and Sayuri Yoshinaga as a detective in a near future Tokyo. Though it opened the Tokyo International Film Festival, the film was bashed critically and failed commercially. One problem was the casting: Sharif was a replacement for Yusaku Matsuda, dead at the age of forty from cancer, who might have been more convincing as both the boss and Yoshinaga's love interest.

After that Masuda remained active in television as both a director and scriptwriter. He had started directing TV dramas in the 1970s, including *Daitokai* (literally, *The Big City*, 1976-1979) and the follow-up *Daitokai Part II* (1977-79), both produced by Ishihara International Productions and starring Tetsuya Watari, with Yujiro Ishihara also appearing.

Most recently, Masuda served as general supervisor on *Space Battleship Yamato: Resurrection (Uchu Senkan Yamato: Fukkatsu Hen)*, a 2009 feature SF/fantasy animation that was yet another iteration of the long-lived Space Battleship Yamato franchise.

During this same post-Nikkatsu period, Seijun Suzuki became celebrated at home and internationally for his boundary-pushing Nikkatsu films, particularly the one that got him fired from the studio, the anarchic actioner *Branded to Kill (Koroshi no Rakuin)*, 1968). Meanwhile, Masuda, whose Nikkatsu work received little distribution abroad, remained all but unknown to foreign fans and critics save as a studio journeyman.

That began to change with a Nikkatsu Action retrospective at the 2005 Udine Far East Film Festival that screened several Masuda films, including *Red Pier and Red Handkerchief*, with the director and Joe Shishido in attendance. A slimmed-down version of the retro, including *Gangster VIP* and *Velvet Hustler*, toured North America in 2007 and 2008, raising Masuda's overseas profile even more.

In 2007 film writer Toshiaki Sato published *Eiga Kantoku Masuda Toshio: Action Movie Giant*, a 526-page study of Masuda's films that featured a long interview with the director. Also, in 2008 the Yufuin Film Festival in Kyushu presented a ten-film Masuda retrospective titled "Toshio Masuda's Limitless Work." Given the range of Masuda's filmography, 'limitless' sounds about right.

In his Nikkatsu period, Masuda was a leader in defining studio style, from borderless action's Eastern Western atmospherics to the mood action mix of danger and romance. He borrowed from European and Hollywood sources, but localised them so the young Japanese audience could identify – and dream.

In the process, he made films that were not only box office hits in their day, but are also still affectionately remembered by Japanese fans and regarded by Japanese critics as genre landmarks. In the industry, Masuda was regarded as a pro's pro who not only consistently delivered strong work in the tough conditions of the Nikkatsu movie factory, but continued to have a flourishing career for decades after the studio system collapsed. Internationally, he will probably never reach the critical heights of the sui generis Suzuki, but a re-evaluation of this genre master, so long overdue, is finally underway.

Born in 1949 in Zaneville, Ohio, Mark Schilling has been a film reviewer for *The Japan Times*, Japan's oldest English-language newspaper, since 1989 and an advisor to the Udine Far East Film Festival, Europe's largest showcase of Asian popular cinema, since 1999. Book publications include *The Yakuza Movie Book: A Guide to Japanese Gangster Films and Nudes! Guns! Ghosts! The Sensational Films of Shintoho*.

His biography of Toshio Masuda originally appeared in his book *No Borders, No Limits: Nikkatsu Action Cinema* and is reprinted here with permission.

THE RAMBLING GUITARIST

Guitar o motta wataridori

Buichi Saitô, 1959

Released 11 October 1959

CAST

Akira Kobayashi as Taki

Ruriko Asaoka as Yuki

Nobuo Kaneko as Akitsu

Sanae Nakahara as Sumiko

Jô Shishido as Killer Jôji

CREW

Directed by **Buichi Saitô**

Produced by **Eisei Koi**

Written by **Gan Yamazaki** and **Kensaburô Hara**

Original story by **Ei Ogawa**

Music by **Taichirô Kosugi**

Director of Photography **Kuratarô Takamura**

Edited by **Mitsuo Kondô**



NORTH BY NORTHWEST: THE TIMELESS ADVENTURES OF A RAMBLING GUITARIST

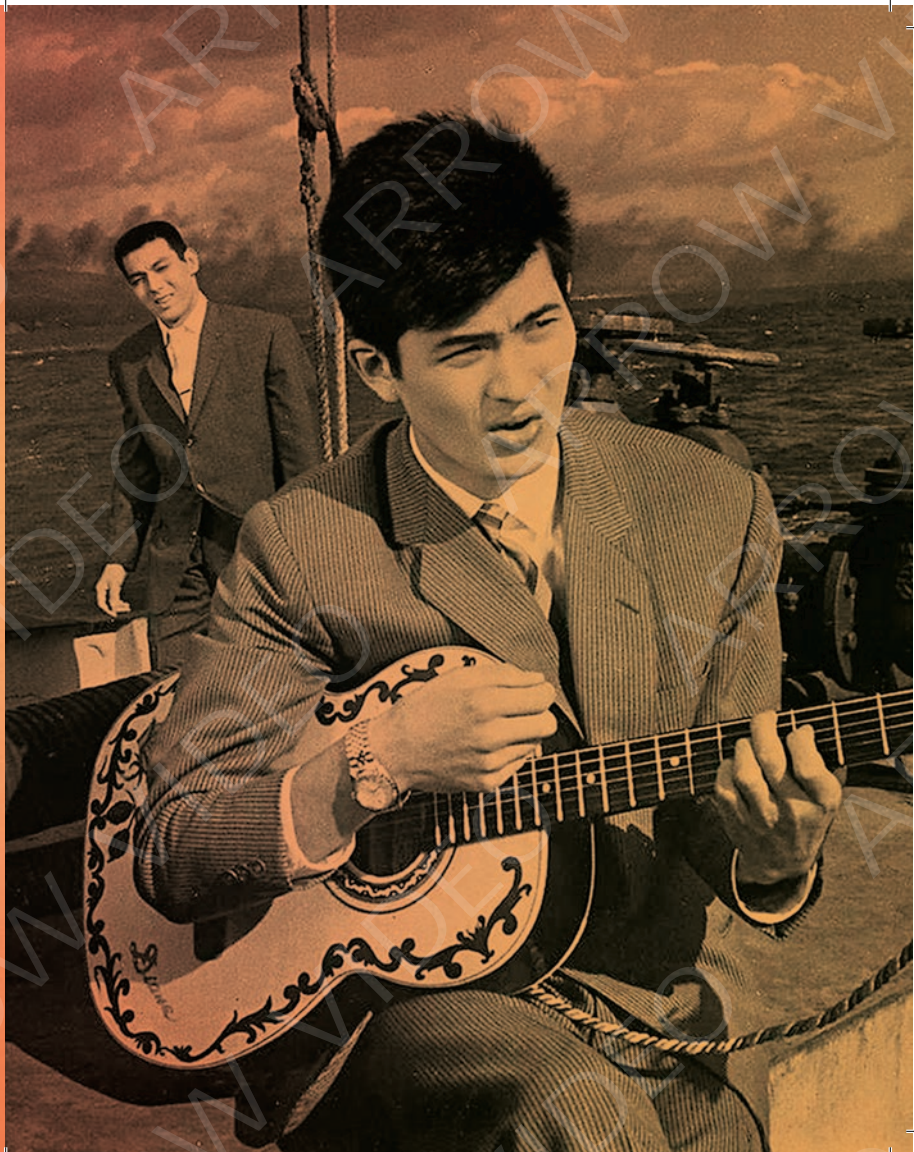
by Tom Mes

It is a clearly Fordian moment when the horse and cart come riding into the frame against a monumental mountain backdrop at the start of *The Rambling Guitarist* (*Gita o motta wataridori*, 1959). The similarity is intentional, of course, but Akira Kobayashi, still fresh-faced and scrawny in this first instalment of what would become a nine-part series, doesn't pause to wipe the dust off his boots or to wonder how green is this valley before heading down into civilization – in this case Hakodate, bustling port town on the southern tip of Hokkaido, Japan's wild frontier.

Once there, it's all neon bar signs and powder blue suits. Our hero Taki, dressed in a Brando-esque Perfecto (with red lining, naturally) has hardly finished his first whisky before provoking a bar room brawl with two foreign sailors and catching the eye of the local kingpin Akitsu (Nobuo Kaneko, the man who made a long career out of playing spineless mob bosses, most famously in Kinji Fukasaku's *Battles without Honour and Humanity* series). Like kingpins everywhere, at least those in movies, Akitsu has use for muscle and after resisting for a while, getting into other fights, and stumbling upon Akitsu's delectable daughter (Ruriko Asaoka, who would play Kobayashi's love interest in all but the final film in the series), Taki stops dodging fate and accepts the offer. An hour later, this stranger will have cleaned up the town and be on his way, alone, toward new adventures. He doesn't quite ride off into the sunset, at least not quite yet: the horse would become a staple from the second film (*The Guitarist and the Rancher / Kuchibue ga nagereru minatocho*, 1960) onward.

Long before Takashi Miike came up with the concept of a *Sukiyaki Western*, indeed quite a few years before even the Italians got properly into the game, Nikkatsu transposed the most all-American of film genres from the deserts of the Wild West to the plains of the Untamed North: the island of Hokkaido. It is no coincidence that Lee Sang-il's recent remake of Clint Eastwood's Academy Award-collecting twilight western *Unforgiven* was set on this northern outpost. With its wide vistas, its rugged terrain, its harsh climate, and its own oppressed indigenous populace (the Ainu, who often serve as the local equivalent to the American western's 'injuns', as in part four of the *Rambling Guitarist* series, *The Rambler Rides Again / Daisogen no wataridori*, 1960), Hokkaido, or at least the Hokkaido of the popular Japanese imagination, forms the perfect environment for the Japanese western.

Even the island's history has similarities with the conquest of the West. The name Hokkaido literally translates as 'the road to the northern sea' ("northern", rather than "eastern", would arguably be a more suitable term for the Japanese western). Though the name itself dates from the late 19th century – and was invented by the Meiji government – "mainland" Japanese have been making forays onto the island since at least the 14th century, when settlers from the main island of Honshu crossed the Tsugaru Strait and established a community on what is now the Oshima Peninsula. The expansion of this settlement led to a conflict with the indigenous population and the war that followed formed the start of the gradual repression of Ainu culture and the expansion of Japanese influence and rule on the island.



ACROSS THE BORDER

That Nikkatsu, being a Japanese film studio, would embrace the western and its preoccupation with what lies beyond the frontier, makes a lot of sense in the light of the studio's signature "borderless action" style of filmmaking. Nikkatsu was Japan's oldest film studio when it was absorbed by Daiei on the eve of World War II, as the film industry was forced to pool its resources into three filmmaking conglomerates (Toho, Shochiku, and Daiei) in an effort to both economise raw materials and facilitate cinema's support for the war effort. Released from its shackles in the early 1950s, Nikkatsu essentially had to start from scratch, since all its production facilities were still owned by Daiei, which continued to exist after the war had ended. When Nikkatsu finally resumed production, with the fortunes it had gathered by distributing foreign films to a hungry audience of city dwellers eager to escape their impoverished lives, it chose to bet not on Japan's indigenous genres like the *jidaigeki* or the *yakuza* film, but on a new kind of dramatic action template fashioned after the American and French films it had been bringing to cinemas in the preceding years. Modelled on westerns, youth films, action comedies, and film noir, Nikkatsu's borderless or *mukokuseki* (literally: 'without nationality') action films spawned more than two decades' worth of quickly-made but mostly imaginative and vivacious genre potboilers, served up in weekly double-bill doses – an output of roughly 100 films per year, in other words.

It was this environment of rupture with genre movie conventions that nurtured the wild and wonderful approach of director Seijun Suzuki, the best-known proponent of the Nikkatsu brand of popular cinema, whose films were a lurid cavalcade of fighting detectives swinging off chandeliers, raging yellow sand storms, frame-filling one-way mirrors, and theatrical sets bathed in primary colours. Suzuki's status as an *auteur* of world cinema, however, rests on the assumption that he was the rebellious odd one out in a landscape otherwise filled with well-behaved anonymous taskmasters who dutifully made their films to order, with no distinguishing characteristics. Mark Schilling's book *No Borders, No Limits: Nikkatsu Action Cinema*, and the traveling film retrospective that originally accompanied it, blew away the *fusuma* screens to reveal the hive of genre filmmaking activity that was Nikkatsu during the 1950s and 1960s.

The studio's output during those decades did not consist exclusively of its borderless action films, although the style would persist into the 1970s in some variation or other: the more atmospheric "mood action" was the style associated with its top star Yujiro Ishihara, while harder-edged "new action" was the early-1970s variant, when younger stars like Meiko Kaji and Tatsuya Fuji had taken over. Nikkatsu's production roster was divided into three levels. The A level produced the studio's most prestigious projects, helmed by such directors as Yuzo Kawashima, Kon Ichikawa, and Shohei Imamura – illustrious names that form part of Japan's pantheon of great filmmakers, lauded at home and abroad as artists. The B and C levels were the domain of stars rather than directors. Projects were tailored around actors and assigned to directors, who were considered artisans with little say in what kind of films got made. This was where the actual action pictures were manufactured, essentially destined to become either bottom halves of double bills with an A film or with one another. In the latter case, the pairing was a slightly more prestigious B-production, such as one starring Yujiro Ishihara, with a C-grade picture often made by a novice director.

Though each consecutive level was saddled with a lower budget than the one above it, means of production even at the B level could still be significant in the sense that we can see in *The*

Rambling Guitarist: yes, that is an actual ferry boat populated with extras leaving from an actual harbour in the film's final moments. The port vistas are genuine, not matte paintings, and much of the film was indeed shot in Hakodate, rather than on a backlot facsimile.

MODELS AND MIRRORS

Seen in retrospect, the stardom of Akira Kobayashi came as a blessing for Nikkatsu. Much of the company's post-war success as a film producer rested on the popularity of Yujiro Ishihara, who had become a sensation as a result of the "Sun Tribe" boom of hedonistic youth films in the mid-1950s, such as *Season of the Sun* (*Taiyo no kisetsu*) and *Crazed Fruit* (*Kurutta kajitsu*), both from 1956. Those few historians that have ventured into the territory of popular Japanese cinema invariably mention that Ishihara's long legs contributed to his fame, helping to find him legions of adoring and admiring fans. Judged by today's standards of stardom, however, Ishihara was hardly blessed with matinee idol looks. His moonfaced and bucktoothed appearance makes one wonder what all the fuss was about.

However, Ishihara's appeal in his heyday was such that Nikkatsu based its casting policies largely on the star's distinctive features and in its casting calls it searched out young men with similar traits: Koji Wada was a dead ringer for Ishihara, but had little else going for him and never achieved stardom in spite of the studio's best intentions (he plays the lead in Seijun Suzuki's *Fighting Delinquents / Kutabare gurentai* from 1960); Tetsuya Watari managed to transcend the stereotyping and carve out not only a niche for himself but build a highly respectable career in his own right (there is not a hint of Ishihara in Watari's manic, indelible performances in Kinji Fukasaku's *Graveyard of Honor / Jingi no hakaba* and *Yakuza Graveyard / Yakuza no hakaba kuchinashi no hana*, from 1975 and 1976).

And then there is the famous case of Jo Shishido, who after a failed audition took drastic measures and went under the knife, so that a pair of implants would puff up his cheeks and give him the desired Ishihara-look. In doing so, he became essentially a parody of Nikkatsu's biggest star. In look and performance, Shishido fashioned himself into a mugging, grinning, hamster-faced caricature of Ishihara. Thankfully for us, he was aware of his parodic appearance and fashioned it into a screen personality that was larger than life and all his own: Joe the Ace.

In *The Rambling Guitarist* we are witness to Joe the Ace's gestation: Joji, the smirking, scarfaced gangster who cheats at dice and shoots seagulls for target practice, crawls out from under a raincoat as Taki's menacing nemesis, seemingly ready to shoot our hero in the back at the first opportunity, but gradually reveals the integrity beneath his devil-may-care attitude. Shishido would refine the act in the sequels, always turning up as Kobayashi's rival-turned-ally, the slimy weasel turned dependable comrade. Soon enough, Shishido was promoted to headliner status and got to be the hero in his own films and film series. The move seems in retrospect to have been inevitable: despite starting his career as someone else's reflection (albeit in a funhouse mirror), there has been no actor in the history of Japanese cinema – or even world cinema, for that matter – who can be compared to Jo Shishido.





BAMBOO MUSIC

If Nikkatsu's stars had their models, its films were no less tailored after illustrious predecessors. *Farewell to Southern Tosa* (*Nangoku Tosa o ato ni shite*) had been a hit earlier in 1959 and solidified the star status of Akira Kobayashi. It was directed by Buichi Saito and co-starred Ruriko Asaoka and Nobuo Kaneko, all of whom came together again for *The Rambling Guitarist*, with the aim of repeating its success. Story-wise, however, *The Rambling Guitarist* plays more like a fusion of Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954) and Samuel Fuller's *House of Bamboo* – films released in Japan in 1954 and 1955 respectively, and therefore fresh enough in the minds of the Nikkatsu production department in 1959, when the green light was given for *The Rambling Guitarist*. Like Sterling Hayden's titular hero in Ray's film, Taki is perennially with guitar and gets ample screen time to strum and sing. Like Robert Stack in Fuller's Japan-set crime thriller, he gets himself noticed by the underworld through displays of brawn and fisticuffs and, once on the inside, proceeds to tear apart the mechanics of the syndicate.

All this goes to show that *The Rambling Guitarist* is as archetypal a genre film as can be. But it is also jauntily playful with those archetypes, making it an exuberant reminder of the timeless, and borderless, appeal of popular cinema.

BALLAD OF AN ACTION MAN: ON DIRECTOR BUICHI SAITO

Fuller appreciation for the popular cinema of the Nikkatsu studio is marred greatly by the towering presence of the company's black sheep: Seijun Suzuki, whose infamous dismissal from the studio in 1967 for making “incomprehensible” films only fortified his position as an *auteur* of world cinema. Recent years have witnessed a reappraisal of a handful of his former colleagues, notably the darker, more experimental films of Koreyoshi Kurahara, while the fact that Ko Nakahira's *A Soul to Devils* (*Yami ni naka no chimimoryo*, written by Kaneto Shindo) was screened in competition in Cannes in 1971 has at least kept his name in the annals of film history.

With an output of roughly a hundred films a year, Nikkatsu's production of genre films during the 1950s and the 1960s has been likened to a conveyer belt, not in the least by those who worked on them. Historians tended to have much the same impression and for many decades snubbed the studio's B and C-level output altogether. However, as the rediscovery of some of these films in the wake of Mark Schilling's book *No Borders, No Limits: Nikkatsu Action Cinema* has pointed out, what Nikkatsu's unsung filmmakers delivered on a weekly basis was rarely less than colourful, vivacious, and thoroughly entertaining. Case in point is the director of *The Rambling Guitarist*, Buichi Saito (often erroneously transliterated as Takeichi Saito and not to be confused with Koichi Saito).

After graduating from Waseda University's Faculty of Letters in 1948, Buichi Saito entered Shochiku's studio in Ofuna, just south of Tokyo, where the company made its signature “Ofuna flavoured” contemporary home dramas. He was assigned the role of assistant to that genre's



leading director, Yasujiro Ozu. Saito worked on some of Ozu's best-known films, including *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949) and *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo monogatari*, 1953).

Saito relocated to Nikkatsu in 1954 with the aim of becoming a director in his own right. He was one of four new directors entering Nikkatsu that year, all of whom would come to put their stamp on the company's output in the decade that followed: Katsumi Nishikawa (who would specialize in Nikkatsu's youth films, often starring Sayuri Yoshinaga), Ko Nakahira (later director of the pivotal "Sun Tribe" film *Crazed Fruit / Kurutta kajitsu*, 1956), and the maverick master of Nikkatsu action cinema, Seijun Suzuki.

Although Saito would become identified most with Nikkatsu's borderless action films thanks to the success of the *Rambling Guitarist* series from 1959 onward, his debut feature at Nikkatsu, *Our Sister's Marriage* (*Ne-san no yome-iri*, 1956), kept him close to familiar territory, with a story about a family of six parentless siblings, whose oldest sister must forego the role of their de facto mother when she decides to get married. The same year Saito proved his versatility by directing *Love Lies Beyond a Falling Star* (*Ai wa furu hoshi no kanata ni*), which despite the saccharine promise of its title was a biopic of Richard Sorge, the German-born agent spying in Japan for the Russians during World War 2, made almost five decades before Masahiro Shinoda's epic version of the same story, *Spy Sorge* (2003).

The double whammy of *Farewell to Southern Tosa* and *The Rambling Guitarist* in 1959 cemented Saito's reputation as a reliable all-rounder within Nikkatsu and the director continued churning out both action films and contemporary melodramas at a rate of several a year. The latter category included *Whirling Tides* (*Uzushio*, 1964), a biopic of the younger years of novelist Fumiko Hayashi, here played by Sayuri Yoshinaga, a film whose legacy is overshadowed by Mikio Naruse's mopey Hayashi biography *Her Lonely Lane* (*Horoki*) from two years earlier, which starred Hideko Takamine.

As Nikkatsu's fortunes began to dwindle and a younger (and cheaper) generation of directors and stars took over, Saito relocated to Toei studios in 1970, which put him to work on several of its signature *ninkyo yakuza* pictures, including the successful *Red Peony Gambler* (*Hibotan bakuto*) series starring Junko Fuji. It was at Toei that Saito first encountered Tomisaburo Wakayama, brother of *Zatoichi* star Shintaro Katsu and a star of both gangster films and *chanbara* movies. Saito directed the fifth and final (as well as the raunchiest) episode in the Wakayama-starring series *The Wicked Priest* (*Gokuaku Bozu*). The pair would work on several more films in 1970 and '71, until Wakayama asked him to take the reins of his pet project, *Lone Wolf and Cub* (*Kozure okami*), based on the long-running manga by Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima and produced through his brother's company Katsu Productions. A commitment to Toei forced Saito to decline the invitation, however, which led Wakayama to his second choice, longtime Daiei *chanbara* filmmaker Kenji Misumi, who would direct the first three episodes. When Misumi in turn went off to work with Shintaro Katsu on *Hanzo the Razor* (*Goyokiba*) in 1972, Wakayama came back to Saito, who this time was able and willing to helm part four, *Baby Cart in Peril* (*Kozure okami oya no kokoro ko no kokoro*).

On this film Saito worked with the formidable director of photography Kazuo Miyagawa, regular collaborator of Kenji Mizoguchi and Akira Kurosawa, who Saito knew from his days as an assistant

to Ozu, for whom Miyagawa shot *Floating Weeds (Ukigusa)* at Daiei in 1959. The influence of Ozu can even be found in *Baby Cart in Peril* in the way Saito and Miyagawa handled axis lines, which shows a similar disregard for what is normally considered right and wrong that one finds in Ozu's films. Another bold visual moment was *Baby Cart in Peril's* opening tattoo scene, which demonstrates impressive use of double exposure.

Saito would also go on to helm several episodes of the *Lone Wolf and Cub* TV series, which starred Kinnozuke Yorozuya as Itto Ogami, and from there would spend much of the remainder of his career directing for television. One notable exception was a comedy he directed for Toei, *Ballad of the Boss of Kawachi (Kawachi no ossan no uta, 1976)*. Starring one of the studio's most distinctive bit players, the gnarly-faced Takuzo Kawatani, in a rare lead role, it was, like *Farewell to Southern Tosa* two decades before, based on a hit song. Its success at the box office even led to a sequel, also directed by Saito the same year.

The very breadth and diversity of Buichi Saito's output make him an unlikely candidate for *auteurist* rediscovery, but his rich filmography and the number of titles still fondly remembered by Japanese audiences demonstrate how skewed and limited our officially sanctioned version of Japanese film history is – and how much pure joy is left to discover.

Tom Mes co-founded the Japanese film website MidnightEye.com with Jasper Sharp. He is the author of books on the directors Takashi Miike and Shinya Tsukamoto, in addition to writing on Japanese cinema for publications around the world.

ABOUT THE TRANSFERS

Voice Without a Shadow, *Red Pier* and *The Rambling Guitarist* were transferred from original film preservation elements by Nikkatsu Studios in Japan.

The films were delivered to Arrow Films as remastered files.

The films are presented in their original widescreen aspect ratio with original mono audio.

In all three films, splice marks are periodically visible at the top and bottom of the frame. This is an accurate representation of the original theatrical presentations and allows as much of the overall picture area to be preserved as possible.

Additional clean-up work on *The Rambling Guitarist* was carried out by David Mackenzie for Arrow Video.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**

Executive Producer **Francesco Simeoni**

Production Assistant **Liane Cunje**

Technical Producer **James White**

QC and Proofing **Nora Mehenni, Michael Mackenzie**

Subtitling **Deluxe**

Authoring **David Mackenzie**

Artist **Graham Humphreys**

Design **Jack Pemberton**

Film Credits Compiled by **Jasper Sharp**

SPECIAL THANKS

Chihiro Abiru, Alex Agran, Tom Barrett, Michael Brooke, Marcella Colaneri, Stuart Galbraith, Takako Hirayama, Graham Jones, Taku Kato, Emico Kawai, David Mackenzie, Tom Mes, Nikkatsu Corporation, Mark Schilling, Jasper Sharp, Hayley Tower

FURTHER VIEWING

Diamond Guys **Hideaki Nitani** and **Akira Kobayashi** appear in other releases from Arrow Video including *Massacre Gun*, *Retaliation* and the *Battles Without Honor* and *Humanity* series. Other yakuza and genre films from Japan available from Arrow Video include the *Stray Cat Rock* Collection, and the *Outlaw: Gangster VIP* Collection and *Nikkatsu Diamond Guys Volume 2*, both coming soon.



FCD1200 / AV037