

Outlaw Gangster VIP: The Complete Collection

★★★★

Arrow, 6 discs, 500 min., in Japanese w/English subtitles, not rated, Blu-ray/DVD Combo: \$79.95



This release collects six groundbreaking Yakuza movies directed by Toshio Masuda and filmed in quick succession by the legendary Japanese film studio Nikkatsu between 1968-69. *Gangster VIP*, which introduces anti-hero Goro (a brooding Tetsuya Watari), begins with a stylish black-and-white prologue recounting Goro's happy childhood before he turns into a fearsome gang member who is adept with a deadly dagger and irresistible to the women he is always ready to save from the threats of macho ruffians. The remaining entries in the series—*Gangster VIP 2*, *Heartless*, *Goro the Assassin*, *Black Dagger*, and *Kill!*—all fall into a predictable pattern. Although constantly trying to leave the mob life, Goro is always inexorably pulled back in (friends routinely die, requiring Goro to take vengeance on their killers), and machinations within the gangs frequently leave Goro badly injured, to be nursed by his faithful girlfriend (Chieko Matsubara). All of the films feature exquisitely choreographed fight scenes, along with bloody finales that invariably find the wounded Goro stumbling off into the sunset. Although formulaic, all six of the *Gangster VIP* movies boast exciting moments, and Watari exudes dark charisma as a man fated to continually—if also reluctantly—pull out his dagger one more time. Presented here in a dual-format collection with both DVD and

Blu-ray editions, extras include audio commentary on *Gangster VIP* by Jasper Sharp, a visual essay on the series, photo galleries, and a booklet. Recommended. (F. Swietek)