

# Kurosawa's Shakespeare

by Tanvir Mokammel

It is interesting to observe how a wide range of gifted filmmakers, different in temperament and in cultural background, from all different parts of the world, toyed with the idea to make films on Shakespeare's plays. Akira Kurosawa, the Japanese maestro and a virtuous stylist, was no less attracted by the great dramatist.

Among the prominent film-makers DW Griffith in the silent era filmed "The Taming of the Shrew" (1908). I never got the opportunity to watch the film but I wonder how Griffith on a silent screen did actually tame the shrew! Among the films made on Shakespeare's plays, the most well known is perhaps Lawrence Olivier's "Hamlet" (1946). Though very well-acted, Olivier's "Hamlet" was, more or less an extension of theatre. So far cinematic language is concerned, "Macbeth" by Orson Welles, may be a better piece of work. Tarkovsky, the inimitable image-maker of our times, staged "Hamlet" as a play. I wonder how he would visualise the Prince of Denmark on screen!

Perhaps due to possessiveness of the English people about Shakespeare, the courage to experiment, and improvise on his works, are more conspicuous in the non-English countries. So no wonder that the best Shakespeare filmmakers emerged away from the Albion's shore. Kurosawa, Kozintsev, Orson Welles, Zeffirelli, all have one thing in common, none of them are English.

When Kozintsev declared to make "Hamlet" people wondered whether it was possible to make a better "Hamlet" than Olivier's one. Kozintsev proved it was. Who can forget the superlative performance by Innokenti Smoktunovsky! Similarly one wondered whether it was possible to make any better King Lear (1972) than the Kozintsev's one. But in "RAN" Kurosawa proved otherwise.

The three important filmisation of Macbeth were Orson Welles's "Macbeth" (1948), Roman Polanski's "Macbeth" (1971) and Kurosawa's Japanese version of it — "The Throne of Blood" (1957). The path to royal throne is smeared with blood all along the way. In the dehumanised world of Macbeth, the sway of

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cruelty, conspiracy and intrigue reign supreme. Kurosawa also had a Japanese title for the film — "The Castle of the Spider's Web". With a creative cinematic change in visuals, Kurosawa changes Shakespeare's Birnam Wood into Spiderweb jungle and Dunsinane becomes the Spiderweb castle and we meet the Japanese Macbeth, a cruel faced Take-tochi Washizu, the ambitious warlord played with elan by Toshiro Mifune. Since Kurosawa's first major work "Drunken Angle" (1948), Mifune remained his chief protagonist, and Mifune's portrayal of Macbeth was unparalleled.

Spiderweb, the very name itself gives an eerie feeling and may remind one of Gloucester's of quoted uttering from "King Lear", "as flies to wanton boys are we to th gods — they kill us for their sport". The way Washizu and Miki get lost in that hunted jungle, the jungle itself takes the metaphoric image of a spiderweb where the fates of human beings are stuck helplessly to a giant web, sewn by an unseen spider. As a cinephile the visual effects of broken leaves and branches, the geometrical compositions of "The Throne of Blood" always fascinated me. The theme of "Macbeth", too some extent, is about the ambiguity of human existence. The labyrinthine forest aptly symbolises the labyrinth of Macbeth's as well as our complex human mind.

The values and ambience of Kurosawa's Macbeth belongs to the militaristic Samurai tradition of medieval Japan devoid of tenderness, love and gratitude. The social structure in which Kurosawa places his plot is highly hierarchical, at one layer are the megalomaniac warlords and at the lower rung are the common soldiers, servants and hapless messengers. Kurosawa's sense of social realism get reflected, when in this otherwise jingoistic violent milieu, he suddenly shows a lyrical sequence of farmers harvesting rice showing the

economic base of this belligerent social fabric.

Shakespeare's evil characters are loners, alienated. Their fall becomes evident when a trait of their character transgresses the welfare of the collective, like Macbeth's unbridled ambition. Kurosawa presents his Macbeth not just as an isolated phenomenon, but a cruel initiator of the system and himself a victim of the system as well.

The shrill tune of a flute during the title card hints the premonition of the evil things to follow. The film begins with a chanting prayer on the soundtrack and we are told that this is the Spiderweb Castle where an overambitious warlord lives.

Kurosawa's Lady Macbeth, Asaji (what a great piece of acting) could easily provoke Washizu to commit parricide by convincing him that the present overlord also captured power by murdering the previous one. It is an eternal cycle of evil. In a shrill monotone Asaji utters her maxim that the way of the world is, you have to strike first, kill first. Otherwise you will be killed. With a very few words Asaji succeeds to implore Washizu to go for the kill. This reticent mise-en-scene belongs to the Japanese Noh tradition. Similarly the white-painted face of Asaji is part of the Noh tradition as well.

Later on to show the distance between Asaji and Washizu, Kurosawa employs the spatial technique. They sit far from each other, an exemplary use of screen space to show the psychological distance between the husband and the wife, a technique so effectively applied by Orson Welles in "Citizen Kane".

Kurosawa did not hesitate to stray from Shakespeare's storyline. Shakespeare's Macbeth would not be killed by someone woman born. Hence Macbeth had to be killed by Macduff. But in "The Throne of Blood", Washizu, Kurosawa's Japanese Macbeth, gets killed by his own soldiers. Kurosawa does not indi-

vidualise the soldiers. We see them en masse and watch the arrows coming and piercing Washizu's body from all different directions. As if the arrows come, as Washizu's nemesis, not from some bowmen but from his destiny itself. What a brilliant finale to end a film! The fatal arrow hits from a side we never thought of and it pierces Washizu's throat. The soundtrack becomes conspicuously silent. And then comes the same chant with which the film began — deplored the limitation of human ambition.

Close up had always been an useful device in Kurosawa's art. In "The Throne of Blood" he made bountiful use of it. In the last close up, just before his death, Mifune with his expressive face, was at his best. The angry belligerent face that he donned throughout the film suddenly becomes the face of a tranquil person, as if after all the turmoils and agonies, he finally returns to peace with himself, at last!

In the end the all powerful Washizu falls prostrate before the feet of his own foot soldiers. We realise that the wheel has come full circle. The omnipotent all menacing feudal overlord is now at the mercy of the common soldiers. "The Throne of Blood" is perhaps Kurosawa's most progressive film. The arrow-ridden body of Washizu may spring in mind the arrow-ridden body of Vismava of "Mahabharat" as well, and the film attains an epic zenith.

And regarding humanism, especially if we compare with Polanski's "Macbeth", where it is not human endeavours, but the dark forces of witchcraft that ultimately wins, and the two other Macbeth films mentioned earlier, Kurosawa's one is perhaps the most close to Shakespeare's comprehensive and robust view about life.

The first "King Lear" was made by Edwin Thanhouser, way back in 1916, during the silent era. Among the recent productions are

Jean Luc Godard's "King Lear" (1987), which has little of Shakespeare and seems more a conscious experiment of Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism. It is the story (rather the non-story, as Godard was a great exponent of non-narrative cinema) of one Don Lear, the Mafia Don and his daughter Cordelia.

Peter Brook, the maestro of the stage,

made two film versions of King Lear.

One was in 1953 in the United States

with Orson Welles playing the main

protagonist. And the other one was in

1969 in Britain with Paul Schofield as Lear. As a filmmaker Brook's success in either one was limited. The reason perhaps, cinema as an artform, was not his first love. Though the Schofield's one is very exquisitely photographed, yet theatricality and not film language, dominated both the productions. May be among the different filmised "King Lear" (1970) the one by Grigory Kozintsev was most rigorously conceived and had the classic bend in its structure. The beauty of the film was qualitatively enhanced by Shostokovitch's scintillating musical scores.

Shakespeare had quite a few old patriarchs — Prospero, Hamlet's father or the Duke of "Measure for Measure". But Lear, the egotist old king, stands out. May be each juncture of history has its own Lear. During France's transition from feudalism to bourgeois economy we find Balzac's Old Goriot, in Russia, Turgenev created his own "King Lear of the Steppes" and Tolstoy, who was not fond of Lear, with his tragic death outside home, ironically became one!

Lear's time was, according to Gloucester, "Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide, in cities mutinies, in countries discord, in places treason, and the bond crack't wixt son and father". Bond was the keyword. In that world of ingratitude and unscrupulous self-aggrandizement, relationship based on human "bond" was all important. With his sense of historic realism,

Kurosawa in "RAN" placed the conflict the bond crack't wixt son and father, between Lear and his sons, which in medieval Japan was much more plausible than between Lear and his daughters.

As a piece of visual cinema, Kurosawa's "RAN" is captivating. The sequence of the attack on Lear's castle by the forces of his two treacherous sons is one of the best war sequences ever shot. A brooding silence in the ambience, positioning of camera, the effective music, the movements of the extras, all work brilliantly together to portray the inhumanity and futility of war. Though sometimes the visuals of the battle scenes are bit gory, yet this scene remains, no doubt a gem of an anti-violence sequence in the whole history of cinema, may be comparable only to Coppola's helicopter attack on a Vietnamese village in "Apocalypse Now" or of Spielberg's D-Day landing in "Saving Private Ryan". And regarding the use of colour, this particular sequence, actually the whole film of RAN can be a text-film. We watch how red as a colour scheme gradually becomes more and more dominant as violence increases on the screen. And at the end the whole screen turns into a tapestry of red.

RAN enriched itself with another phenomenon, that is, Buddha's maxims. On the backdrop of gory violence and abysmal anarchy, Buddha's message for peace adds a special dimension to the film. And after all those cathartic experiences, profound sense of optimism ultimately shines over the cruel violence around.

Until last century, Shakespeare belonged to the stage. But with the advent of Cinema, the prospect to visualise the nuances of human nature has elevated to another plain. And among Welles, Kozintsev, Godard, Zeffirelli, so far the best visualisers of Shakespeare on screen, Kurosawa somehow stands tall. With only to Shakespearean films, his achievement is monumental. Had Shakespeare watched Kurosawa's power to create images, his craftsmanship to portray the unfathomable depth of human nature, he would have exclaimed, life is a not a stage, but a screen!

The writer is a front-ranking film-maker of the country

## fiction

## Purnimar Raat or, The Night of the Full Moon

by Gautam Sengupta in Bangla. Translated by Mir Waliuzzaman

Like any other serious predicament, it all had started most ordinarily. And, .... if the phenomenon which is being considered to be the underlying reason of everything is found correct, then it should boil down to a very simple affair, after all. Because ... the darling daughter used to be cross with her parents regularly, as they happened to be late returning home almost daily. And, for that matter ... who would like to come back to an empty home everyday... unlock the front door.... and wait, and wait for them ... sitting all alone?

Jiji, however, was never to return home straight from her school. She had to attend her tutorials four times a week, and music and dancing classes on Saturdays and Wednesdays respectively. She would spend her Sunday mornings at home, taking painting lessons. Had she, then, got mad at seeing the yellow note posted on the refrigerator ... after she had just been back from the weekly dancing session? Certainly she was ... or, why should she crush the chit in her palm angrily, and throw the

paper ball away so fiercely, blindly that it rolled under the sofa and rebounded from the wall?

But that missive was such an ordinary one! That simple letter read like this: Kiddo adarling mine, your sandwiches are in the box; please eat them after washing your hands well using Lifebuoy liquid. In case auntie Mitra phones, tell her we'll be late returning home tonight. Pay Shubal twelve rupees when he arrives with the laundry; you'll find the money under the telephone address-book. Be a nice, goodie-goodie kiddo. OK? Your dearest Mum-Mum-Maa.

Now ... if this endearing note from her mother had angered Jiji (that is, if she had read that at all and afterwards got enraged), then, immediately after she had read the letter, or otherwise, ... sometime after she had got back home that evening ... she had thrown her satchel (possibly stooping a little, following her very favourite Azzu's style), aiming to land that on her bed, in her room. But the heavy bag perhaps had grazed the bedroom door and fell a cubit

away from the wall where a mirror was hung, which was, right on the left of the box containing her new Reeboks.

It's also difficult to surmise if she at

all had made faces then at her grandma

(at her photograph actually, as was

customary with her) or secretly dropped hints of her formidable resolve. Of

course it might have so happened that

she hadn't even considered taking any

such vow!

On the wall facing grandma were the busts of the always apathetic Azhar, black-shirt Jackson and one-earring-adorned Sachin, hung in a row. In the mirror, Jiji might have exchanged quick glances with Jackson as well; right then, she might have considered returning Rimpfy's cassette. But during that fateful evening, she had not ventured towards Rimpfy's place though. On the contrary, she had proceeded in the opposite direction, leaving the Buddhist temple on her left. As soon as she switched her Sony walkman on, ... her favourite tune was playing ... Did you even stop to notice the crying earth, the weeping shores!

But things were different with Jiji during grandma's days ... that is, when granny was alive. As soon as Jiji's footsteps were heard on the stairs outside, she would open the door ajar to receive her. As Jiji used to enter into the house, granny would gather her fondly in her arms, taking the satchel off her shoulders, complaining earnestly all the time ... who says it's a school-bag ... it's a veritable bale! Jiji would lose no time ... she would wash her hands and face in a jiffy and sat down to eat her repast, holding onto her grandma like an appendage. The old lady always gave her most delicious and exotic tiffins to eat — milk and ripe bananas mashed with soft rice, fine flattened rice steeped in hot milk and mango juice, sweetened and condensed milk or some other recipe, not quite known to or favoured by Jiji's mum-mum-maa and her likes.

Grandma's fingers would delve into Jiji's hair and caress her scalp ... darling, your mum-mum-maa will be a little late to-day ... she would softly say. Oh, don't mention her, grandma .... Jiji would sultrily interpose ... her face buried in her granny's cosy, reassuring lap. No dear, good girls don't say such things about the elders .... God Almighty will be angry with you ... granny would says, and then, as if to better compensate for her mother's absence, she would be recounting the favourite fairy tales for Jiji's pleasure.

It was apparent that Jiji had not washed before leaving the house that evening. The toilet was thoroughly dry. The wash basin was a little tinted with coke though. So, it was conjectured that she had partially used a can of Coca-Cola (that her father used to dilute his drinks of rum) and drained the rest down the sink. The empty can was found one the sofa.

It's still not quite clear why she had left home; maybe the familiar fragrance that used to exude from her granny's living body was wafted to her by one of those fairies in an elfin boat .... or ... maybe she had wanted to teach her parents an opportune lesson! Maybe she was getting lost in a kind of strange monotony, a kind of unsavoury fatigue ... she may have dozed in the wavy

dark folds of an unfamiliar void ... like an alien, like a somnambulist ... she may have walked away in a dream ... on her sojourn to another dream domain.

Well, for the convenience of recounting the tale, let's assume that Jiji had stopped at some place abruptly, in the midst of her sentimental stroll. That stoppage had roused her, rendering her aware of the environs. She had realised that she had trodden on unfamiliar grounds somewhere around the lake. She had found stacks of huge cement pipes on one side and dark, heavy lake waters on the other. The full moon reflected in the water reminded Jiji of her father, because it was Babi (as she fondly called him) who had mentioned in the morning that it was Buddha Purnima (full moon) that night. And standing there, all by herself, when Jiji was experiencing a creepy, chilly sensation and considering to go back home ... and setting her shock of hair with the right hand in a bid to ward off her nervousness, ... about that time, Nellow had spotted her.

To be continued

## art

## Saint-Lazare Station, as seen by the Impressionists

by Claudine Canetti

In the 1870s, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Gustave Caillebotte and a few other less known artists were to sing the praises of the railways, steam engines and the Pont de l'Europe bridge, a work of industrial engineering whose metal girders span and overlook the railway lines.

The exhibition starts with an enigmatic masterpiece by Manet, *Le Chemin de Fer* (The Railway) painted in 1872 and exhibited at the Salon of 1874 where it gave rise to the sarcasm of critics and the heinous verve of caricaturists. There is neither a train nor railway lines in this painting, but thick swirls of white smoke masking an urban landscape which is being looked at

through railings by a little girl in a white dress with an enormous blue sash, seen from the back. Seated next to her, a young woman with a book on her lap, looks up at the spectator. It is Victorine Meurent, Manet's favourite model who had posed for *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* (Picnic on the grass) and Olympia and who made her last appearance in this picture. The exhibition presents some of the marvellous portraits that she inspired in Manet, including the famous *Jeune Dame au Parrot* (Young woman with a parrot).

The caption of one of the ferocious caricatures inspired by *Le Chemin de Fer* is "two mad women, suffering from incurable monomania, watch the

carriages go by through the bars of their padded cell".... A subtle detail discovered by the organiser of the exhibition, Juliet Wilson-Bareau, adds extra spice to the picture. The facade sketched in by Manet in the background of his painting is that of a building located in rue de saint-Petersbourg where, in 1872, he had set up his studio and where he was to spend the six happiest and most fruitful years of his life.

Claude Monet, for his part, is fascinated by the station itself which he paints on the spot and which inspired eleven marvellous paintings, nine of which are presented in the exhibition. He had moved to the district in winter 1876-1877 after living in Argenteuil for

several years. He obtained official permission to set up his easel inside the station. Perched on a pile of crates, in a swirl of white, blue, pink and mauve smoke, he painted the departure or arrival of the black steam-engines, the swarming passengers on the platforms and the busy railway workers on the tracks. He haunted the station in all seasons and painted it in many kinds of lighting and from various angles, seen from outside with the Pont de l'Europe bridge or from inside in a din that seems audible.

Emile Zola, whose novel *La Bete Humaine* has the railway as its central theme and begins with a description of Saint-Lazare station, is filled with admiration when he sees Monet's "superb interiors of stations". In them, one can hear the rumbling of the trains plunging into it and one can see the gushing smoke swirling beneath the huge sheds", he wrote. "That is where painting is today. Our artists have to find the poetry of stations just as their forebears found that of forests and rivers".

Another painter and another style. Far from Monet's ethereal, light-filled mists, Caillebotte is fascinated by the Pont de l'Europe bridge and its crossed girders which he paints meticulously, working on the effects of perspective and placing a few characters who, by contrast, bring out the cold geometry of the construction.