

# Hara-kiri: The Death of a Samurai: Cannes 2011 Review

4:16 PM PDT 5/19/2011 by Maggie Lee



Director Takashi Miike's remake of Masaki Kobayashi's "Harai-kiri" features a strong central performance by Japanese actor Ebizo Ichikawa

CANNES – Anyone expecting a 3D film on Japanese ritual suicide by the director of such ultra-gory fare as *Ichi the Killer* to have guts and entrails squirting out from the screen has another thing coming. *Hara-kiri: The Death of a Samurai*, **Takashi Miike's** remake of **Masaki Kobayashi's** 1962 *Hara-kiri* is expensively mounted with comfortably unobtrusive 3D effects, ceremoniously slow, and oh so respectable. As a critique of the hypocrisy and inhumanity of *bushido* it lacks a bitter sting, nor does it search for a new angle to the subject.

Rather than Miike's regular extreme Asia genre fans, who may not stay awake for the final spurt of action, this film should pursue an older age group with an acquired taste for well-made period drama, such as **Yoji Yamada's** *Twilight Samurai*. In Japan, leading man **Ebizo Ichikawa**, the hottest and most scandal-prone Kabuki actor of his generation will provide necessary buzz for the film. Niche theatrical release can expect decent returns.

The viewing experience offered by the film's 3D effects is one of deeper perspective and greater vividness. Objects come into sharp focus, such as frayed threads from kimonos, snowflakes and trees aflame with autumn leaves. It's merit – effects are less strain on the eyes and don't impede with story flow. However, they are too tame for those who like things to leap out of the frame.

The film closely follows the story arc of its textual source: **Yasuhiko Takiguchi**'s *Ibun Roninki*, set around 1630, a time of widespread unemployment for the low rung samurai class. A down-and-out ronin named Hanshiro (Ichikawa) calls on the illustrious clan of Ii begging them to grant him space to commit *seppuku* (ritual disembowelment) so he can die the honorable samurai way.

Kageyu, the lord of the house (**Koji Yakusho**) tries to dissuade him by recounting what happened just two days ago. A young man claiming to be Motome (**Eita**) from the disbanded Chijiwara clan has made the same request. A flashback reveals how they sadistically make an example of him to deter other "suicide bluffs" whose real intention is to exhort a meager handout.

With a story-within-a-story and flashback-after-flashback structure, there is rich potential for suspense and tension – something Kobayashi exploited to the hilt with long takes and hard cuts that play with the audience's consciousness of time. Not only does he convey the mounting dread of waiting for death, he also plots the revelation of Hanshiro's true intentions with precision.

Miike is less consistent with his narrative tempo, beginning with an unusually flat first act which only begins to stir after about 30 minutes with Motome's seppuku scene. He then proceeds to disperse all the tension with a painfully long melodrama reaching back in time to Motome's childhood, and explains why he and Hanshiro are finally driven to such desperate measures.

Although Motome's gentle nature and his plight of having a sick wife (**Hikari Mitsushima**) and dying infant eventually achieve tragic resonance, Miike wavers about the emotional pitch he wants to achieve. More Mizoguchi than Miike, the middle act is somber in color tone and lighting, and full of static shots and arch compositions. Especially distancing are shots through a mosquito net that blur characters' figures and expressions.

The naturalist acting of Eita, the over-the-edge passionate display of Mitsushima and Ichikawa's studied theatricality don't quite gel either. Ichikawa finally gets his moment when the film springs into action in the last 20 minutes. His kabuki background not only enables him to execute the sword fights with immaculate grace, his magnetic enunciation makes his speech denouncing Kageyu's spurious code of honor resound with eloquence.

Japanese title *Ichimei* means "one life." Technical package is high end and low key.

*Venue: Cannes Film Festival (Competition)*

*Sales: Hanway Films*

*Production companies: OLM, Sedic International, Recorded Picture Company, Shochiku*

*Cast: Ebizo Ichikawa, Eita, Hikari Mitsushima, Koji Yakusho, Munetaka Aoki*

*Director: Takashi Miike*

*Screenwriter: Kikumi Yamagishi*

*Producers: Toshiaki Nakazawa, Jeremy Thomas*

*Director of photography: Nobuyasu Kita*

*Production designer: Yuji Hayashida*

*Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto*

*Costume designer: Kazuko Kurosawa*

*Editor: Kenji Shibasaki*

*No rating, 128 minutes*