

Ran

Japan/France, 1985 – 160 mins

Akira Kurosawa

As this dazzlingly photographed transposition of *King Lear* unfolds on the mountain slopes and volcanic plains of Kyushu, Akira Kurosawa astonishes again with the spectacular action that earned him a Best Director Oscar nomination and made *Ran*, at the time, the most expensive Japanese film ever, surpassing the benchmark established by his previous sixteenth-century epic, *Kagemusha* (1980). What makes *Ran* a masterpiece, however, is the skill with which, as in *Throne of Blood* (1957), Kurosawa tailors Shakespeare to Japanese history and culture.

He had pondered the legend of Motonari Mori, a sixteenth-century warlord whose three sons were paragons of goodness, and wondered what might have been if Mori's children had been less virtuous. He found his answer in Shakespeare. Lear's daughters become the three sons of warlord Hidetora, aged seventy (as was Kurosawa when he began the script): Taro is equivalent to Goneril, though lacks her implacable malice; Jiro is as ruthless as Regan and Cornwall; Saburo is the recalcitrant yet devoted Cordelia.

Saburo and Tango, a Kent-like retainer, are banished for challenging Hidetora's decision to cede power to Taro in an open-air division of the kingdom. With the rival factions colour-coordinated by Emi Wada's Academy Award-winning costumes and hierarchically arranged in a circle, this is the first of many scenes in which, as Donald Richie points out in his masterly study, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (1996), *Ran's* compositions are reminiscent of the groupings of figures in Noh theatre. Parts of Toru Takemitsu's score copy the percussion and pauses of Noh music and, as Hidetora, the formidable Tatsuya Nakadai's stylised make-up is based on Noh masks.

Soon after the division, Taro makes his father sign away all power at the immense First Castle – a humiliation utterly contrary to *giri*, Japan's complex system of interpersonal obligations, which places great emphasis



Lear and his fool: Hidetora (Tatsuya Nakadai) and Kyoami (Peter) wander the countryside as outcasts in Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*

on children's respect for elderly parents. In Japanese eyes, Taro's ingratitude is perhaps even more offensive than Goneril's and it is emulated by Jiro, who treats Hidetora with disdain at Second Castle.

By now it has become clear that, unlike Lear, Hidetora is not 'more sinned against than sinning'. His downfall is retribution for having spilled 'an ocean of blood' while suppressing rival families, and Kurosawa summons great pity for two of his victims: Jiro's deeply religious wife, Sué, who watched Hidetora burn her parents alive, and her beautiful brother, Tsurumaru (an amalgamation of Edgar and Gloucester), whose

eyes were gouged out by Hidetora, and who finds some solace playing his *fué* (Noh flute). Though they have ample cause to see Hidetora suffer, their profound Buddhist faith has enabled them both to forgive, and it is Taro's wife, Kaede, played by Mieko Harada with extraordinary, quiet menace, who turns this *Lear* into revenge tragedy. Hidetora murdered her father and brother and drove her mother to suicide and, like a younger, sexier version of Asaji in *Throne of Blood*, she manipulates Taro into mistreating his father and, after Jiro has had her husband killed, seduces and marries him so that she can complete Hidetora's destruction.

Yet while the King languishes in the countryside, attended by thirty knights, a dozen concubines and his androgynous, graceful fool, Kyoami (Peter, a transvestite singer hugely popular on Japanese television), a happy ending remains possible. He need only follow Tango's advice and live with Saburo at the home of his father-in-law, Fujimaki (equivalent to the King of France). Having misjudged his son so badly, however, Hidetora asks Tango: 'How could I face him?' The Japanese obsession with not losing face prevents reconciliation, and this twist on the *Lear/Cordelia* relationship seals Hidetora's fate.

Taking refuge in the Third Castle, he is attacked by his elder sons' troops, and his men are wiped out in an astonishing ten-minute battle. We can only see, not hear, terrible carnage: men hit by musket rounds and flaming arrows, Hidetora's concubines committing *seppuku*. Takemitsu's trumpets, strings and muffled timpani (modelled, at Kurosawa's insistence, on Gustav Mahler's First Symphony) are the only sounds until Taro is shot in the back by Jiro's wily lieutenant, Kurogane (Hisashi Igawa), and the cacophony is suddenly audible. Hidetora staggers from the burning fortress like a soul descending into hell – the most potent and obvious of *Ran*'s many metaphorical images and sounds (distant, ominous thunder in the division scene; blood-red sunsets; Hidetora lost in fog).

In the *Lear*-like storm that follows, Nakadai's make-up changes, the fierce visage of the opening hour gains a deeply lined forehead and red-

rimmed eyes, speaking more eloquently of his torment than the script, which gives Nakadai only the briefest of speeches and when Lear's lines are paraphrased at greater length, it is Kyoami who delivers them. Hidetora sows the seeds of the tragedy but is seldom its central figure, and the Expressionistic presentation of his mental decline led Richie to suggest, perceptively, that 'he becomes a visible idea' rather than the 'believable person' created by Shakespeare.

After the outcast pair find short-lived refuge in Tsurumaru's hut, Kurosawa choreographs a second remarkable battle, involving 1,200 extras and 200 horses, in which Saburo's musketeers decimate Jiro's cavalry. Hidetora and Saburo are briefly, movingly reunited, before a climax even more harrowing than *Lear*'s. Saburo is shot dead and Hidetora dies of a broken heart. The army of a rival warlord, Ayabe (effectively *Lear*'s Burgundy), attacks First Castle. Kaede, having engineered the beheading of Sué, is herself beheaded by Kurogane, who joins Jiro in suicide.

It falls to Tango, addressing the grieving Kyoami, to sum up the film's view of humanity: 'Men – they are so stupid that they believe that survival depends upon killing. No, not even the Buddha can save us.' The apocalyptic final shot – Tsurumaru helpless on the edge of a precipice, silhouetted against the last of those morbid sunsets – underlines why Kurosawa chose *Ran* as his title; it can mean 'chaos', 'rebellion' or, more aptly for *Lear* and this adaptation, 'desolation of the soul'.

Dir/Editor: Akira Kurosawa; **Prods:** Masato Hara, Serge Silberman; **Scr:** Akira Kurosawa, Hideo Oguni, Masato Ide; **DOPs:** Takao Saito, Masaharu Ueda, in collaboration with Asakazu Nakai; **Score:** Toru Takemitsu; **Main Cast:** Tatsuya Nakadai (Hidetora Ichimonji), Akira Terao (Taro Ichimonji), Mieko Harada (Lady Kaede), Jinpachi Nezu (Jiro Ichimonji), Yoshiko Miyazaki (Lady Sué), Daisuke Ryo (Saburo Ichimonji), Peter (Kyoami), Masayuki Yui (Tango), Takeshi Nomura (Tsurumaru), Hitoshi Veki (Fujimaki), Hisashi Igawa (Kurogane).