And this is the question asked, indeed, by both parts of Eroica. In the first, the hero rushes off to rejoin his friend in more dismal fighting, leaving his wife calling out “Don’t leave me alone, Petsy!” In the second, we are left with the foreclosed future of the men walking in a circle.

This is not, of course, inspirational in any obvious sense, and Munk received sharp criticism from at least one Soviet critic, R. Youreniew, for his “formalism and pessimism.” But if, as Munk and the Poles who applauded Eroica seem to do, one takes film for a serious art and not an instrument of simple education, the question is one that drama implicitly must often raise, and sometimes answer. And it is from their persistent consciousness of this that the Polish film-makers have drawn their strength. The fierce humor and the expressionist force of Eroica’s two parts both spring from a healthy unwillingness to turn away from life toward pleasanter fictions. —Ernest Callenbach

Ikiru


Of the series of six Japanese films recently shown in New York by Brandon Films, it is rather surprising that the film to win the widest popular support was Akira Kurosawa’s Ikiru (To Live!). Surprising, because this long (2 hours and 20 minutes) film about a minor government employee dying of cancer does not, on the surface, suggest itself as subject matter for a popular success. That it enjoyed a successful run, however, is gratifying indication that recognition of Ikiru as a masterpiece of film-making was not restricted to critical acclaim.

Kurosawa’s directorial prowess was recognized when Rashomon burst with the force of a new discovery on the Western world. Seven Samurai, though less immediately overwhelming, corroborated our first impressions, but so far we have had little opportunity to assess Kurosawa (or Japanese films as a whole, for that matter) in anything more contemporary than the period pieces that many people associate with, and think typical of, Japanese filmmaking. The recent series in New York was intended to bridge that gap by offering films on contemporary aspects of Japanese life, although the scheduled two-week run for each film had to be abandoned in the face of poor critical and audience reception for several of the films. Of the six shown, the three films by Kurosawa—Drunken Angel, The Men Who Tread on the Tiger’s Tail, and Ikiru—were the most interesting. Drunken Angel, with another of Toshiro Mifune’s striking performances, ably aided by Takashi Shimura, suggested a deeper probing of postwar Japanese life than one expected in a story of a tubercular petty racketeer and the drunken doctor who tries to save him despite himself, but its effect was weakened by a slightly sentimental approach and by an apparent derivation in style from gangster films of the West. The Men Who Tread on the Tiger’s Tail, completed in 1945 but barred from exhibition until 1953, was advertised as a parody of a kabuki drama, but its effect was less than complete on a Western audience which was not familiar enough with the original form to fully appreciate the parody. Running barely an hour, the film, with its stylization and theatricality, served to reveal another facet of Kurosawa’s talent and provided an interesting contrast to his other films shown. But even though the full effect of the film was lost, the humanism that pervades all of Kurosawa’s work was evident in his treatment of the story.

That humanism was very much at the heart of Ikiru as it followed a petty bureaucratic official, Kanji Watanabe (portrayed by Takashi Shimura in an impressive and beautifully modulated performance), in his efforts to discover some meaning to his life when he realizes that he has only a short time left to live. Dehumanized by the soulless routine of his job, he has
actually been dead as a human being for twenty-five years, but it is the reality of approaching death that makes this fact clear to him and sends him on his quest for some purpose to his existence. His efforts to establish contact with the son for whom he has sacrificed so much are rebuffed and misunderstood. Seeking release and human contact through a sensual riot, he latches on to a Mephistophelean writer who conducts him through a hellish Walpurgisnacht of dissipation, but he finds no answer therein. Only with a young girl, an ex-employee of his office, does he discover any companionship and any purpose. Her pleasure in the simple task of making toys for children provides him with the example that leads him to complete the final action of his life—the conversion of a waste area into a playground despite almost overwhelming bureaucratic opposition.

This fairly simple story is handled in a complex manner. A narrator's voice accompanies the opening shot of an X-ray, dispassionately explaining to us the gastric ulcer that will cost Mr. Watanabe his life and plunging us immediately into the situation. This coldly objective voice returns later to explain facts directly to the audience and to bluntly announce Mr. Watanabe's death. The film switches abruptly from present to past and back again through quick flashbacks as the central figure recalls episodes from his life—his wife's death, his adolescent son disappointing him in a school baseball game, that son's departure for the front during the war. For about two-thirds of the picture we follow the viewpoint of Mr. Watanabe, but with nearly an hour of the film still to go Kurosawa makes what is certainly a daring move. The whole last part of the film is constructed around the wake for the deceased and our attention is transferred to his family, his fellow employees, the deputy mayor and other officials. The sudden change in point of view detracts from the unity of the picture by breaking the film into two parts, but this weakness is offset by the brilliance with which Kurosawa handles this final episode. From slowly paced scenes and stretches of almost unbearable silence, the tempo gradually accelerates as the mourners
discuss the deceased and his efforts in pushing through the playground project. Bits and pieces of information supplied by those present at the wake, revealed to the audience through flashbacks, explain his character and actions to his puzzled colleagues as the sake flows more freely and the talk becomes more animated. This episode is remarkable for its variety of characterizations: the opportunistic mayor, the misunderstanding son and brother, the querulous bewildermont of one employee, the sober, quiet dignity of the one friend who truly understands Watanabe, the heartfelt grief of a group of women from the playground area, the maudlin sentimentality and self-pity with which the tipsy mourners promise to benefit from Watanabe's example. Kurosawa has set himself a problem in allowing so much of his film to rest on this one scene of action. But his treatment of this section—the revelation of character, the slow dramatic buildup, the subtle variation in camera setups and groupings of characters, the use of silence and sound—makes it a real tour de force.

The film has other merits also. Some of the flashbacks are remarkable for their compression of feeling, particularly those where past memories crowd on Mr. Watanabe in the silence of his room. Montage, camera angles, sounds, and lighting all combine in the “nighttown” sequence to produce a picture of overwhelming horror and vulgarity in which Watanabe's tearful, drunken singing of a sentimental love song from his youth stands out as a moment of purity among the blaring jazz, a strip-tease dancer, the predatory prostitutes, the packed mass of humanity swaying together on the dance floor, the jukeboxes and flashing lights. On the other hand, there is a tenderness and a great depth of perception in the treatment of the scenes between Watanabe and the young girl he befriends (a delightful performance by Miki Odagiri). His fumbling attempts to establish rapport with her are thwarted when the girl, bewildered by his attentions, repulses his offer of friendship. Their final meeting together in the restaurant is possibly the film's finest individual scene. The gap between the generations, already indicated in the relationship with the son, and the isolation of one individual from another are beautifully illustrated in Watanabe's desperate attempts to hold on to life through this girl and to discover her secret of unabashed joyfulness and simple pleasure in the most commonplace events. She never really comprehends his needs, and she recoils in revulsion from the announcement of his impending death. All she can convey to him is her simple-minded pleasure in manufacturing cheap little toys that will bring pleasure to someone. A counterpoint to the poignant irony of this scene is provided by the birthday celebration for a young girl being held in the background. The total effect is quite overpowering.

Aside from providing a revealing glimpse of postwar Japan, Ikiru probes the heart and mind of an individual on a scale that far transcends national boundaries. Perhaps a reason as simple as this accounts for its acceptance by critics and audiences alike. Kurosawa has endowed the film with compassion and understanding, with an ironic awareness of human weaknesses and a knowledge of the dignity of the individual. Certainly Ikiru stands in the front rank of contemporary cinematic art; along with Satyajit Ray's trilogy it is one of the most powerful humanistic documents the screen has yet presented.—William Bernhardt

From the “nighttown” sequence of Kurosawa's Ikiru, with Takashi Shimura (right).