

Life after the bomb

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By MARK SCHILLING

The Face of Jizo

Director: Kuroki Kazuo

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 were Japan's single greatest catastrophe of World War II. They loom so large in the popular imagination that the events of the previous decade and a half have paled -- or faded from view altogether. (Conveniently so, as Asians affected by those events have noted.)

In millions of words and images, eulogizing and otherwise, the bombings have been ritualized and abstracted in that same imagination, their horror endlessly referred to, but less and less clearly felt. Meanwhile, the victims have come to be seen more as park statuary, less as flawed human beings.

Filmmakers of the war generation have tried, in recent years, to reclaim that humanity, including Kurosawa Akira with "Rhapsody in August (Hachigatsu no Rhapsody)" (1993) and Imamura with "Dr. Shohei Akagi (Kanzo Sensei)" (1998), but they have also found the memorializing urge hard to resist. Though recognizably -- even eccentrically -- human, their heroes glow with the nobility of wronged innocents.

Born in 1930, Kuroki Kazuo is also of the war generation, but his trilogy of war films -- "Tomorrow" (1988), "Kirishima 1945 (Utsukushii Natsu Kirishima)" (2002) and now "The Face of Jizo (Chichi to Kuraseba)" (2004) -- come from a different, darker place than those of many of his contemporaries. As a 15-year-old

war plant worker, Kuroki saw his friends and colleagues blown to pieces in an air raid. Instead of staying to help the wounded, he ran to save his own skin -- and carried a burden of guilt forever after. His war films, he has said, are an act of penance.

The filmed version of a play by Inoue Hisashi, "The Face of Jizo" is not as personal a film as "Kirishima 1945," which was not only about Kuroki's wartime boyhood, but also filmed in the same house and fields where it unfolded. Nonetheless, it expresses themes close to Kuroki's heart, including survivor's guilt, even when the survivor has done little or nothing to deserve it.

Also, Kuroki is less interested in conventional attitudes, however grand, than the human truth of a specific time and place. Set in Hiroshima in 1948, "The Face of Jizo" reflects the poverty, exhaustion and traumas of the time, placed in the context of a close and textured father-daughter relationship. The verbal thrust and parry between the two, played by a graying but still sprightly Harada Yoshio and a stressed but still lovely looking Miyazawa Rie, at times verges on the sitcomish -- and had the Iwanami Hall audience laughing out loud. (For non-native speakers of standard Japanese, a prescreening glance at the script is advisable; otherwise the characters, who speak in Hiroshima dialect, may sound as though they have marbles in their mouths.)

"The Face of Jizo" has its stagey, lugubrious and overly determined side, but the warmth and passion generated by its two leads mostly carry it through -- and gives the ending the right mix of poignancy and chill. A well-made "play" indeed.

It begins with Mitsue (Miyazawa), a young librarian, rushing home in a thunderstorm,

frightened out of her wits. Her terror, we soon see, is a product of the war, particularly the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, which she barely survived.

She lives with her father, Takezo (Harada), in their bombed-out house, now partly repaired. Dad is her confessor, adviser and friend, the only one she can tell about her fears, dreams and past. Most of her friends and family died in the bombing -- including Dad.

That Dad is with her only in spirit doesn't faze her -- or him, for that matter. He looks, acts and talks like one of the living (one of the more robust and vital living in fact). But, as befits a ghost no longer bound by selfish earthly concerns, he is interested only in her problems, particularly her budding relationship with the shy, bespectacled Kinoshita (Asano Tadanobu), who is researching the bombing and wants Mitsue's help -- and possibly slightly more than that.

Mitsue resists Takezo's efforts to play matchmaker -- and not just out of maidenly reserve. She feels she has no right to be happy. How can she marry, have a family and all the rest, when so many of her friends have been reduced to ashes? There is also another reason for her guilt, which she can only reveal under duress and never rationalize away.

Nearly all the action takes place in Mitsue and Takezo's house and garden, with only occasional glimpses at Mitsue's past as well as her present-day encounters with Kinoshita. Miyazawa and Harada thus have to carry the

film almost entirely on their own -- and carry it they do. A larger-than-life type known for his excesses on and off the screen, Harada channels his formidable energies effectively, while riding the fine line between fatherly joshing and bullying. Miyazawa, who starts by playing 23-going-on-13, proves to be an adequate foil for Harada, while expertly revealing Mitsue's dark side.

Miyazawa's performance also draws strength from her of-the-period attitude and appearance. Most young actresses would have looked too buff and radiant for the role; Miyazawa, who has successfully battled the anorexia that nearly ended her career, flawlessly impersonates a woman who has suffered through postwar food shortages and health crises. I only hope she doesn't look as wispy off camera as she does on.

There will be more films about Hiroshima, just as there will be more about the Holocaust. But "The Face of Jizo" may be among the last by a director with a living memory of the bombing, now nearly six decades past.

What will the next generation have to say about it? Will they use Kuroki and Inoue's allusive approach, which assumes a knowledge of Hiroshima that a younger audience may not have? Somehow, I think they will come up with something different, more direct. Japan may yet get its "Schindler's List."

This review appeared in The Japan Times, Aug. 4, 2004