

Commentary to *Orochi* (Serpent) and *Gyakuryu* (Backward Flow)



Tadao Sato
(Film critic and President of the Japan Academy of Moving Images)

In Japan, screenings of silent films were accompanied by narration from a *katsudo benshi*, or motion picture narrator, so they were rarely “silent.” This was particularly true for *chambara* (sword fighting) films, in which the story was centered on sword fights. Early Japanese silent films were accompanied by music played on Japanese instruments such as the *shamisen*, and Western films were accompanied by music played on Western instruments such as the piano. However, from a certain period onward a new performance format emerged that combined music played on both Japanese and Western instruments. In a normal concert, the collaboration of Japanese and Western music was impossible, but at movie theaters musicians were known to perform impromptu and indulge their imagination. So at the climax sword fighting scene of a *chambara* film, the audience would yell to the screen, the *benshi* would raise his voice, and musicians would perform with an inspiration that overcame barriers between Japanese and Western music to further raise the excitement.

Gyakuryu (Backward Flow) 1924, and *Orochi* (Serpent) 1925 were two representative works of Tsumasaburo Bando, a superstar who marked a new era, created while he was in the peak of his popularity. The boom in Japanese *chambara* films started around 1910, and the sword fights in the earliest examples were performed with a slow grace that reminded one of a *kabuki* performance. Each time the hero samurai killed one enemy, he would pause and hold a pose. The young actor Tsumasaburo Bando, who made his debut in 1923, changed this style of sword fighting completely with his speedy action. After killing one enemy, he would move to next enemy without pause.

In Hollywood, the action superstar Douglas Fairbanks was already giving acrobatic performances in surprisingly speedy action scenes in exciting films such as *The Mark of Zorro* and *The Three Musketeers* (both in 1920). In Japan, theater performances were influenced by such films, and a theater company called *Shinkokugeki* led by Shojiro Sawada introduced active sword fights different from *kabuki* performances and these enjoyed immense popularity. The young star Tsumasaburo Bando applied these techniques to film.

Rokuhei Susukita, a leading screenplay writer, produced a number of period dramas hits which have elements of the rebellious feeling lingering in the society of that time. He kept his eyes on Tsumasaburo Bando as an appropriate actor for his films from when Tsumasaburo Bando was still young and not so popular. Their films excited audiences not just because the sword fights were speedy, but also because the action scenes highlighted the tragic beauty of the stories. Still in its infancy, Japanese cinema was inspired by high ideals. In this sense, *Gyakuryu* (Backward Flow) and *Orochi* (Serpent) have come to be regarded as cornerstones in Japanese film history.