

Nishikie Edosugata Hatamoto to Machiyakko
(The Color Print of Edo: Hatamoto to Machiyakko) and
Dokuro (Skull)

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Utaemon Ichikawa was one of the rare film stars who was able to enjoy a very long period of popularity. Born in 1907, he first appeared on the *kabuki* stage at the age of five. He was scouted at the age of 18 and shortly thereafter made his big screen debut. He was a star from the beginning. By 1964 he had appeared in over 360 films. It was his decision to retire only when he lost popularity and could no longer act. There are numerous films in which he played the lead and an equal amount of films in which he made special appearances, but not a single one in which he played a supporting role. Except for a brief period after World War II when the occupying forces ordered the prohibition of *jidaigeki* (period drama), all of Ichikawa's films are set in the past. He was wonderful as a samurai and marvelous as a *kyokaku* (chivalrous hero).

Ichikawa's popularity was not just based on his good looks, strength and imposing presence, rather it was the bright and cheerful aspects of his nature that made him so admired by the public. This brightness shines through particularly well in *Nishikie Edosugata Hatamoto to Machiyakko* (The Color Print of Edo: Hatamoto to Machiyakko), released in 1938. A *hatamoto* was a samurai living in the Edo era serving directly under Shogun Tokugawa of the Edo Shogunate, who could take great pride in the fact that his rank was equivalent to that of a *daimyo* (lord). This is not to say that every *hatamoto* was suitable for such a high rank, there were also misguided *hatamoto*, called *hatamotoyakko*, rage-filled men who formed gangs and committed acts of violence. Those that rose to fight against the *hatamotoyakko* were called *machiyakko*, and they were the first *kyokaku* (chivalrous heroes) of Japan. In this film, Utaemon Ichikawa plays the role of the main character, a man born into the house of a *hatamoto*, but who detests the idea of becoming a prideful samurai so much that he becomes a *machiyakko* and begins to pick fights with the *hatamotoyakko* who are bullying the townsfolk, winning the acclaim of the people of the town in the process. A born free spirit, he is happy to be a hero. He executes a very thrilling plan to help out his older brother, a samurai unable to be in a relationship with the servant woman that he loves.

Utaemon Ichikawa may have ascertained mass appeal by playing the role of a cheery and agreeable fellow, but this was not the only type of role that he played. During his younger days he performed as a tragic hero in quite serious films. *Dokuro* (Skull), of which only a portion remains, was released in the period shortly after his debut, and is a tragic work which is considered to be one of the films that launched his career.

Ichikawa made fans howl by using the skills he cultivated on the *kabuki* stage and through Japanese dance to create the splendor of a truly beautiful fight. On the other hand, in performances like his role as Tsunatoyo Tokugawa in Mizokuchi Kenji's *Genroku Chushingura* (The 47 Ronin) - a subtle and dialogue-heavy film lacking fight scenes - he shows a distinguished acting ability. The man himself believed that his specialty lied particularly in *chambara* (sword fighting) scenes, and so he focused his attention on films with these scenes in order to present himself as large and grandiose a figure as possible. He was a humble and openhearted man whose appearances on the screen were always dignified, and became all the more so as he aged.