The Burmese Harp: An Allegory for the Time of Desert Storm

Rating: ** (1956) Running Time: 116 minutes. Not MPAA rated.**

Credits

Director: Kon Ichikawa	**Screenplay: Natto Wada (Ichikawa's wife; based on Michio Takeyama's novel *Harp of Burma*)**
Producer: Masayuki Takaki	**Editing: Masanori Tsujii**
Lighting: Ko Fujibayashi	**Music: Akira Ifukube**
Director of Photography: Minoru Yokoyama	

Cast

Private Mizushima: Shoji Yasui	**Captain Inouye: Rentaro Mikuni**
Defense Commander: Tatsuya Mihashi	**Village Head: Yunosuke**
Old Woman: Taniye Kitabayashi	**Takeo Naito: Kobayashi**

By T. Larry Verburg

The Burmese Harp **(Biruma no tategoto) is a poignant elegy to the failure of Japanese imperialism in World War II and a plea for a more humanistic world. Because it is a Japanese film and portrays events from the perspective of a proud, yet defeated nation, the story it tells is doubly moving. Released in 1956, director Kon Ichikawa's film was made while Japan was still recovering from the effects of war and a full decade before the nation's economy improved on world markets and the international prestige of Japan's technology began its remarkable climb.**

Born on November 20, 1915, Kon Ichikawa is considered one of Japan's leading directors. Ichikawa's first major film, *A Girl of Dojo Temple* (1946), was a puppet version of a Kabuki play. The American Occupation authorities confiscated the film because its script had not been submitted for their approval. Ichikawa's early films were often comedies or satires—a rarity in Japanese cinema—and earned him the appellation of the "Japanese Frank Capra." Ichikawa first achieved fame in the West with *The Burmese Harp*, which won the San Giorgio Prize in 1956 at the Venice International Film Festival.

In his later films, Ichikawa explores the isolation, the comedy, or the irony involved in man's struggles to achieve his goals. He explores his conviction that "man struggles against himself more than against nature or others" (Bawden, 348). In all of his films, Ichikawa collaborated with his wife, Natto Wada, one of Japan's foremost scriptwriters.

The events depicted in *The Burmese Harp* are on the surface quite simple. The viewer becomes aware of the film's symbolic and allegorical nature only later on in the film. The story concerns a small band of Japanese soldiers who are fighting in a remote part of Burma, unaware that the unconditional surrender of Japan

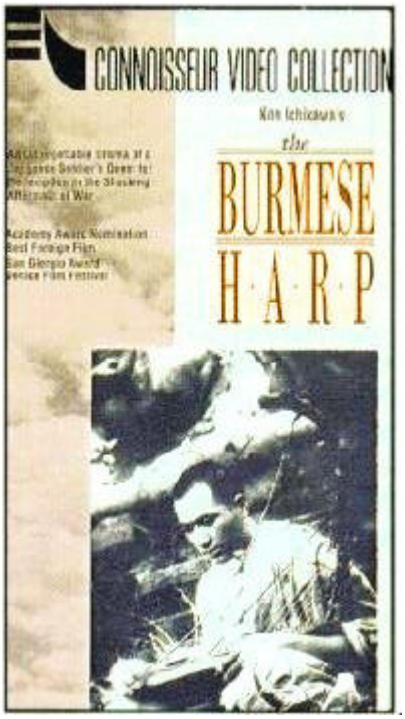
took place three days earlier.

One of the band, Private Mizushima (Shoji Yasui), plays a harp to wile away the time and to entertain his comrades. The ranking officer, Captain Inouye (Rentaro Mikuni), is a former musician, and his soldiers relish the music of the harp and the joy of singing together. But this love of music signifies more than just a temporary release from the stresses of men at war. The men's singing becomes a leitmotif throughout the film and a symbol for the community of spirit that binds them all together. Music functions in the film as a semi-religious, semi-mystical force that has the power to unify and to heal.

The Burmese harp itself is a central symbol in the film that serves to define Mizushima and his quest. The harp is an element of stability in the lives of all of the men. That is why they so profoundly miss Mizushima and want him to accompany them homeward. Later in the film, when his comrades come across Mizushima disguised as a Buddhist priest, they are not sure that he is, in fact, the friend they had believed dead. It is only when he plays the harp that they truly know their former comrade is not dead.

Melody is equated with the life of the spirit and the joy of home and happier times. The discord of war is heightened by the presence of this music in the midst of palpable fears, where sudden death is not the most frightening, and a painful, lingering death from starvation or wounds is a very real possibility for each man. In a wonderful early scene, Mizushima and his comrades confront British troops as night falls. In the midst of a small celebration, the men learn that British troops are nearby and watching them. But the Japanese continue singing casually in an effort to gain time to ready themselves for battle. But the disguise is not really necessary, as the British themselves burst into song and the two nationalities blend in an instance of peace and harmony with renditions of "There's No Place Like Home."

It appears that the men have gained their separate peace. But Mizushima is sent to persuade another cut-off band of soldiers to surrender. But they stubbornly refuse to stop fighting, even though the war is over. Mizushima's allotted time is over and the British shell the group before Mizushima can persuade them to surrender. All the men are killed, except Mizushima. Wounded, he awakens to the horror that all around him are dead. He struggles to regain his comrades, but his wounds are too great and he collapses. Eventually a mendicant Buddhist priest passes by and befriends Mizushima, nursing him back to health. One day, while the priest is bathing in a near-by stream, Mizushima steals his clothes and runs away. Thus begins his transformation.



Disguised as a Buddhist priest, Mizushima begins a journey that ends as a religious pilgrimage. In a trek through an inferno-like landscape, Mizushima discovers score upon score of unburied soldier. Before he can leave this virtual vision of hell replete with carrion feeding on the dead, he is compelled by some inner force to bury the fallen soldiers. Afterward, he locates his friends who have been interned in a prisoner-of-war camp in the Burmese village of Mudon. But he will not acknowledge them. He passes them on a bridge, head averted, as they return from a work detail. Mizushima's journey is no longer one of geographical distance; it is one into the Japanese heart and soul.

Although Mizushima is terribly lonely and desires to return to Japan, he cannot. His duty, he realizes, is not to return to a war-torn Japan and commence the job of rebuilding society. Instead, Mizushima joins the Burmese order of Buddhist priests. He cannot leave Burma until he prays for the souls of the fallen Japanese soldiers.

But there is a vital link that joins each man in the company in intimate connection with Mizushima: the Burmese harp. Throughout his ordeal, his journey to hell and back, Mizushima has kept his musical instrument. Now, in Mudon, the harp is the only thing that consoles him in the loneliness and isolation of his mission. In a sense, Mizushima is a living memorial to the Japanese dead. He must, through prayer and meditation, reconcile the tragedy of war with the gift of life. Mizushima realizes that the war, this great waster of lives, has left Japan and her soldiers profoundly wounded. Japan must be made spiritually whole again. The war and the dead—both Japanese and British—must be memorialized ("lest they forget"). For only the dead can teach the living that life is too sacred and fragile a thing to trust to governments. For Mizushima, the noble abstractions of duty and honor pale beside small kindnesses tendered to those in need.

The concept of Buddhist humanitarianism, peace, and love are incarnate in the priest who befriends Mizushima. But what will the Japanese soldiers bring home with them; what knowledge has the war taught them? Mizushima is reborn in the knowledge that only when the true and honest and spiritual in men is recognized

as worthy of reverence, can nobility of spirit be achieved. The Burmese "ruby" he finds by the river as he digs graves with his bare hands symbolizes this truth. Only in an understanding of the strengths and limitations of mankind can future wars be avoided. Perhaps, like Mizushima, men will come to understand these truths through their baptism of war. But man, like Mizushima, must first achieve a heightened awareness of the greater sorrow and suffering that is life itself. Then, in a small way, his suffering will have been justified. Only when he achieves this reconciliation can he allow himself the journey homeward.

(Biographical details in the second and third paragraphs are from *The Oxford Companion to Film* (1976), edited by Liz-Anne Bawden, and *The Film Encyclopedia* (1979) by Ephraim Katz.)

Please send any comments or suggestions to:

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