

Gate of Hell



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed and written by Teinosuke Kinugasa. Produced by Masaichi Nagata. Based on an old Japanese legend. Cinematography by Kōhei Sugiyama. Music by Yaushi Akutagawa. Edited by Shigeo Nishida. Costumes by Zazo Wads.

Cinematic length: 87 minutes. Distributed by Daiei Films and sponsored by the Japan Society for release in the U.S.A. Cinematic release: October

1953 (Japan) December 1954 (USA) DVD/Blue Ray release 2012. Check for ratings. Rating 90%.

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Written Without Prejudice

Cast

- Kazuo Hasegawa – Morito Endo
- Machiko Kyō – Lady Kesa
- Isao Yamagata – Wataru Watanabe
- Yatarō Kurokawa – Shigemori
- Kōtarō Bandō – Rokuroh
- Jun Tazaki – Kogenta
- Koreya Senda – Gen Kiyomori
- Masao Shimizu – Nobuyori
- Tatsuya Ishiguro – Yachuta
- Kenjirō Uemura – Masanaka
- Gen Shimizu – Saburosuke
- Michiko Araki – Mano
- Yoshie Minami – Tone
- Kikue Mōri – Sawa
- Ryōsuke Kagawa – Yasutada
- Kunitarō Sawamura – Moritada

Review

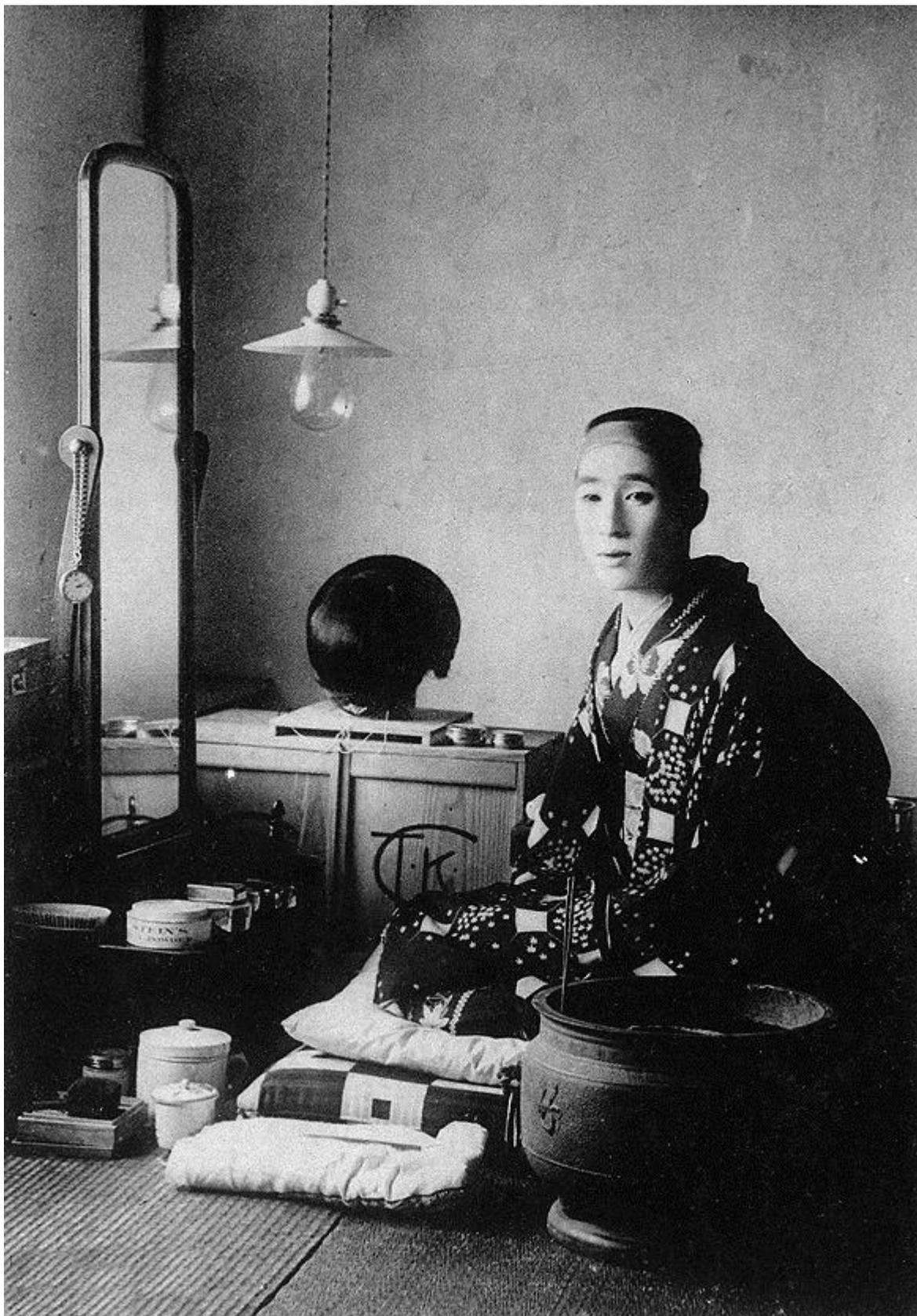
Gates of Hell is based on an old legend concerning events in 1160 Japan when a rebellion came very close to toppling the emperor. The filmmakers make the story's origins very clear by having the title cards superimposed over a lacquered box, which is opened as the title cards end to reveal opening scrolls.

The voice over narrator then tells us the circumstances of the legend and then the film cuts to the desperate battle where the emperor's supporters are being overwhelmed by the traitors.

While the princess escapes the commander quickly organizes one of the ladies in waiting to be a decoy. Dressed in royal robes and put in a wagon with an escort commanded by a samurai, Morito, she does indeed serve well as a decoy, attracting large numbers of enemy warriors, ably repulsed by Morito, who shelters Kesa at his home. His brother Moritada soon arrives with his retinue, explaining why he has joined the traitors and why Morito should join him. At this point it seems that the rebels have won, but Morito does not worry about this or the complexities of royal power plays, self-survival or expediency. All he can say is that he has taken an oath to be loyal and he will live by it. Morito leaves Moritada and Kesa make their way to their superior Kiyomori at his fortress, where he leaves a grateful Kesa and following orders, Moritada goes to rally support.

Amazingly the emperor wins and the loyalists are summoned before Kiyomori to gain promised rewards by their request. Here is Moritada at the pinnacle of his success. Others ask for estates, but Moritada asks for Kesa to be his wife. There is some amusement amongst the audience as it is revealed that Kesa is married and Kiyomori asks for another request - and at that point Moritada's downfall begins. He angrily insists that Kiyomori keep his promise and give him what he asked for. When others tell him of rules and impossibilities it is clear to them and to us that he is a man who does not understand rules, complexities or how hierarchies operate. His virtues of courage, audacity, determination, decisiveness and making decisions on simple judgements, the qualities that took him to the pinnacle of success, now work against him as he turns his efforts towards winning Kesa, by any means that will work.

His desire blinds him to the developments and consequences of his actions. The tragedy unfolds as he becomes a bully, a blackmailer and conspires to murder, failing to see what unfolds or what he is becoming - until self-inflicted tragedy strikes.



Writer-Director Teinosuke Kinugasa 1896-1982



Kazuo Hasegawa as Morito

The romantic triangle in *Gates of Hell* bears some similarities to that in *Rashomon*. Once again we have a lustful samurai who desires the wife and is willing to kill to get her and willing to force himself on her. Once again the husband is phlegmatic. The character of the wife here however is virtually the opposite of that in *Rashamon*. Kesa is self-sacrificing and loyal, looking on Moritada's lust with distaste. Ironically both wives were played by Machiko Kyo.

While *Rashomon* was a virtual attack on Japan's Medieval values, *Gates of Hell* virtually upheld them, showing what happens to an individual who discards them for personal satisfaction.

Gates of Hell has often been praised, most frequently and rightly for its vibrant, yet subtle cinematography. However its music, interiors, landscapes, costumes, sound and skilled editing are of a similar quality.



Machiko Kyo as Kesa

The economic use of narrative reminds of Bergman's 1950s medieval retellings. The film may have faded into obscurity if the Japan Society had not sponsored an American release in December 1954, fourteen months after its Japanese release. Bosley Crowther, one of America's most influential and acerbic critics, realised its greatness and publicly praised it. His efforts and winning the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and the New York Film Critics Circle Award, both in that same year, ensured its fame. It went on to win other European and American

awards. At the Academy Awards months later it won Best Foreign Language Film and Best Coloured Costumes. In the twenty-first century it became one of the very few films to get a 100% approval rating in the rotten tomatoes poll.

By being true to its own simple story, by striving for perfection in its craftsmanship and by seeing Medieval Japan in its own terms, not dressing the past up for a modern allegory this film has not dated sixty years on.



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