

The Gateway fine arts

kurosawa and the dying life

An extraordinary treatment of an ordinary story: the result is "Ikiru," one of the best films the Edmonton Film Society has brought us to date. The film, whose title means "Living," was produced in 1952 by the Japanese director who is well known for "7 Samuri" and "Rashomon," Akira Kurosawa.

The story is simple. An aging government official learns he has only six months to live. The realization throws both past and future into a new perspective and initiates the struggle of the hero to find values which will make at least what is left of his life meaningful.

There is no plot but this. Nor does Kurosawa strive for character development; we remain at an impersonal distance from Mr. Watanabe, seeing him more as a problem than a person.

"Ikiru's" development depends essentially neither on plot nor on character, but rather on the progress of a theme. This is apparent from the outset, when Kurosawa presents in jolting succession the three elements of the theme which the film develops.

The first scene is of the X-ray; it symbolizes physical death. Next, we see Mr. Watanabe hunched at his desk stamping papers from a pile of documents that towers behind him—"living death". Then suddenly, the petitioner appears with problems of children and sewage; forecasting Watanabe's eventual salvation.

"Ikiru's" 150 minutes are almost exclusively devoted to tracing the transition from a tedious "living death" to authentic life—catalyzed by the first element—the threat of imminent death.

There is nothing new about this theme. Release from the living death of a monotonous, valueless world by means of vicarious death has been classroom language ever since Eliot wrote "The Waste Land". Heidegger and Sartre have made the concept of achieving authentic existence by means of affirming a project in view of death common coinage.

Kurosawa adds little to the development of the well-known "death-in-life-life-in-death" theme. The fact that his film emerges as original and significant art is due mainly to his choice of medium; old ideas, expressed in terms of the camera, became new ideas.

Consider, for example, Kurosawa's depiction of unauthentic life in the first half of the film through shots of office life and Watanabe's misguided attempts to justify his existence through his son, through a brief excursion into the world of canteen and club, and finally through friendship with the indefatigable working girl. Although the issues dealt with are familiar, they are treated in a form unique in cinema.

The much discussed tedium of routine work is depicted by a series of shots of papers piled

high over workers heads, of deliberate clutter, of pounding rubber stamps, of blank official faces that lead the petitioners in a futile chase from department to department. The shots are quick and even in succession, thereby establishing a rhythm that reinforces the tedium.

Or again, consider the film's view of the hackneyed theme of machine-dominated man. Three times in the course of the film the camera catches Mr. Watanabe wedged between honking cars. The fourth occasion upon which the machine encroaches Mr. Watanabe is while he is supervising his park project. He is knocked over. The common women, who signify the human qualities of mercy and gratitude throughout, carry him away from the machines.

One of the wasteland themes most effectively portrayed is that of mass man. Who could forget the shot in which the camera descends from the bandstand, skimming the musicians' horns to pan the dense crowd of unindividuated dancers. Only slowly does it close in to identify Watanabe and his drunken companion caught tightly in the press.

Kurosawa uses his medium equally effectively in presenting the complement to the wasteland world—Mr. Watanabe's discovery of a project that makes life meaningful. Like Eliot, the film refers to this process as a rebirth. It begins in an inn; Watanabe is telling the working girl of his illness and imminent death.

In contrast, people in the background are celebrating a birthday. We glimpse a cake with one candle. While the old man clutches the girl's white rabbit and runs out to "do something" through which he can affirm his worth, the chorus chants happy birthday.

The tune, taken up triumphantly by brass, carries us into the ensuing scene in which Watanabe initiates his project. Only cinema combining sound, image and the possibility of instant transition to a new scene could achieve the final effect.

The process of rebirth is completed by the device of the flashback. Telling the story of Mr. Watanabe's project by means of flashbacks from the funeral emphasizes the fact that authentic life has come only through death, as well as allowing ironic comment on the construction Watanabe's colleagues put on his behaviour.

In all too many films, the flashback is used clumsily with the result that it impedes the flow of the film's main events. But here the flashbacks are the story; there is no joggling but rather a steady development to the point where we, with the hero's son and one of his colleagues, understand his new satisfaction.

From the point of view of technique too, "Ikiru" is remarkable. Kurosawa jolts his audience with abrupt changes in scene and sound. Camera angles are varied effectively. Light is handled well. The composition of shots attests to both the director's sense of plastic beauty and his sensitivity to the point he is illustrating.

If any criticism of "Ikiru" is to be made, it would be that Kurosawa overapplies his skills. To some, the progress of the film may seem almost too deliberate, the repetition of formally composed shots almost contrived.

If "Ikiru" (or the clever short "Ai" which accompanied it) are indicative of the calibre of films to be shown by the Film Society this season, students would be



THE FROSTING ON THE CAKE—Smiles wreath the faces of the Kaleidoscope Players as they prepare to dip into the collected poems of the vulpine New Englander. What with their presentation of Frost and Irving Layton's presentation of Irving Layton this week, the naive observers might think that poetry Matters in Edmonton.

well advised to get tickets for the remaining ten shows while they are still available.

—Beverley Gietz

fate knocks routinely at the door

What makes a good symphony orchestra? Is it technical skill, or musical feeling, or conductor, or even audience? To these questions we have no simple answers, my friends. Which is just a way of saying that we have no answer at all.

But while attending the first Celebrity Concert last Thursday, I was frequently struck (hard) by this thought: that although the Minneapolis Symphony is always precise in its execution, and its conductor never lacking in control, neither is it always interesting.

Now at the average ESO concert, there is always a good deal of excitement, arising from the fact that any members of the audience who happen to be listening are twisted in torments of anxiety and suspense, acutely curious to know whether or not the orchestra will bungle the performance.

But the great proficiency of the Minneapolis Symphony precludes any such titillation, and as a result, the orchestra has to make its impact by playing the music well. Technical precision is taken for granted, and what is called for is a truly exciting interpretation, both by conductor and orchestra.

These essentials were present to the full in the playing of the Berlioz Corsaire Overture and the two encores, and evident, though to a lesser degree, in the Barber "Medea" excerpts and Debussy's "Iberia".

But there was definitely something wrong in the main work, Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C Minor.

It is one of the greatest of all musical tragedies that the Fifth is

as hackneyed as it is. Parts of it have even lamentably passed into the field of (shudder!) Popular Music. And it is so terribly laden with associations that I suspect many people think that it was written by Winston Churchill.

In short, any meaningful performance of this great work nowadays has to be fresh, brilliant, and overpowering. Much as I regret to say it, the Fifth last Thursday was not fresh, not brilliant, not overpowering. It was competent.

There was no shock in this performance, nor was there any of the exaltation and satisfaction inherent in all great performances of this score.

Nevertheless, the concert was not a failure for falling short of perfection in one work on the program, and I for one was greatly edified by hearing an orchestra play an entire evening of music with very few false notes and a beauty of tone that was ravishing.

Now if the Edmonton Symphony, with all of the elan and feeling for which it is so justly famous, could perform that way . . .

—Bill Beard

studio free for students

First the good news: free tickets to this year's Studio Theatre productions, for students, on a first-come-first-served basis.

Now pay attention while I spell out the intricate details.

Tickets will become available three days before each opening performance. For this season's first presentation, Tennessee Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof", this means November 19.

The place to go is the Drama Department office, rm. 329 in the Old Education Building (alias Corbett Hall). It will be open from 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. on Nov. 19 and Nov. 22; on Saturday, Nov. 20 it will be open from 9:30 a.m. to noon.

Bring along your I.D. cards; don't rely on your studious appearance.

Passes are not available at times other than those stated. If, by some mischance, you don't get your pass, turn up before the performance prepared to pay \$2. At 8:20 p.m. all seats left unoccupied will be sold to those wishing to buy.

Therefore, those of you who have picked up your passes should make certain to be in your seats by 8:20 p.m. Otherwise you'll have to pay the \$2 and take your chances.

One last thing: don't get the idea that because it's free it's no good. Studio Theatre puts on the best theatre in Edmonton, and its productions last year ranged from good to excellent.

This year they bode even better.

—J. O. Thompson

fine arts calendar

Irving Layton, poet—Friday—12 noon MP 126; 9:30 p.m. Yardbird Suite.

Leningrad Kirov Ballet (film): "The Sleeping Beauty" (Tchaikovsky)—to Wednesday—Paramount Theatre—8:15 p.m.; Sat. and Wed. mats. 2 p.m.

Edmonton Symphony (with Gary Graffman, pianist)—Jubilee—Saturday 8:30 p.m., Sunday 2:30 p.m.

Film Society (classic): "Bringing Up Baby"—Monday—MP 126—8:15 p.m. (members)

Fundament Poetry Reading: early Canadian poetry read by Freda de Branscoville—Wednesday—Yardbird Suite—8:15 p.m.

"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" (Edward Albee)—Nov. 10-27—Citadel Theatre (10030-102 St.)—8:30 p.m.—Box office phone 424-2828.

"You Touched Me" (Tennessee Williams)—Nov. 10-20—Walterdale Playhouse (10627-91 Ave.)—8:30 p.m.

The Nude Figure—facsimile drawings: sculpture—Groups Show—to Nov. 19—Fine Arts Gallery—7-9 p.m.

Indian Masks (from the Glenbow Foundation)—Monday through November—Edmonton Art Gallery.

Bruce Boyd: paintings—Nov. 8-20—Jacox Galleries.