

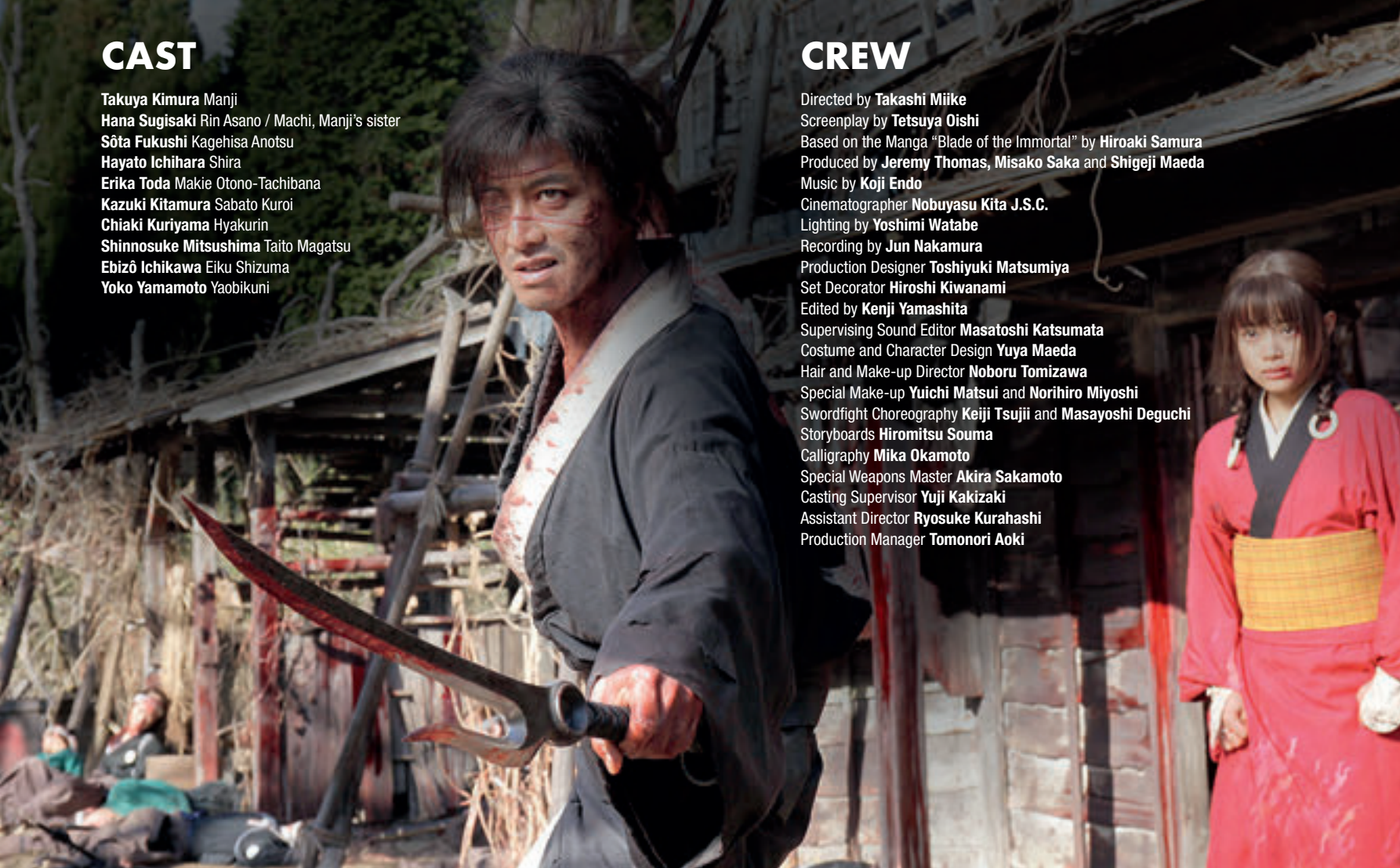


CAST

Takuya Kimura Manji
Hana Sugisaki Rin Asano / Machi, Manji's sister
Sôta Fukushi Kagehisa Anotsu
Hayato Ichihara Shira
Erika Toda Makie Otono-Tachibana
Kazuki Kitamura Sabato Kuroi
Chiaki Kuriyama Hyakurin
Shinnosuke Mitsushima Taito Magatsu
Ebizô Ichikawa Eiku Shizuma
Yoko Yamamoto Yaobikuni

CREW

Directed by **Takashi Miike**
Screenplay by **Tetsuya Oishi**
Based on the Manga "Blade of the Immortal" by **Hiroaki Samura**
Produced by **Jeremy Thomas, Misako Saka** and **Shigeji Maeda**
Music by **Koji Endo**
Cinematographer **Nobuyasu Kita J.S.C.**
Lighting by **Yoshimi Watabe**
Recording by **Jun Nakamura**
Production Designer **Toshiyuki Matsumiya**
Set Decorator **Hiroshi Kiwanami**
Edited by **Kenji Yamashita**
Supervising Sound Editor **Masatoshi Katsumata**
Costume and Character Design **Yuya Maeda**
Hair and Make-up Director **Noboru Tomizawa**
Special Make-up **Yuichi Matsui** and **Norihiro Miyoshi**
Swordfight Choreography **Keiji Tsujii** and **Masayoshi Deguchi**
Storyboards **Hinomitsu Souma**
Calligraphy **Mika Okamoto**
Special Weapons Master **Akira Sakamoto**
Casting Supervisor **Yuji Kakizaki**
Assistant Director **Ryosuke Kurahashi**
Production Manager **Tomonori Aoki**



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A REASON TO LIVE THE OUTLAW VALUES OF TAKASHI MIIKE'S BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

by Anton Bitel

The Hundred Killer

"I wanted to cut open my stomach like a samurai should, but if I did that, she'd be left in the dirt. It's hell."

In the black-and-white prologue to Takashi Miike's *Blade of the Immortal* (*Mugen no jûnin*, 2017), based on Hiroaki Samura's manga series (1993-2012), Manji (Takuya Kimura) speaks these lines to the mysterious 800-year-old nun Yaobikuni (Yoko Yamamoto). Having murdered his own master (a *hatamoto*, or bannerman, to the Shōgun himself) and six of his master's constables, Manji is now a disgraced samurai and a wanted man on the run. He is also caught on the horns of a moral dilemma - a quandary that cuts to the contradictory heart of ideologies in feudal Japan. On the one hand, having dishonoured himself by betraying his own master, the only way for Manji to restore his honour is in an act of ritual disembowelment (or *seppuku*); on the other, Manji had killed his master only because of the master's own murderous corruption, so that Manji now has reason to question the hierarchal code of honour that demands his own obedience and punishment. Manji still wants to die, but feels responsible to his younger sister Machi (Hana Sugusaki), whose husband was one of the constables killed by him, and who has subsequently lost her mind, requiring Manji's protection for her own survival. Accordingly, the scenario at the beginning of *Blade of the Immortal* is not unlike the one in Kazuo Koike's manga *Lone Wolf and Cub* (*Kozure Ôkami*, 1970-76), or in the six Tomisaburo Wakayama-starring movies (seven, if you count the 1980 remix *Shogun Assassin*) which that series inspired: an outlawed, fugitive *rōnin* wandering the land, defending himself and his young ward from constant attack.

The difference, though, is that before even the prologue is over, a confrontation with a shameless bounty hunter and his massive gang leaves Machi dead, and Manji dying. It is only through the unwanted intervention of Yaobikuni, who, instead of dealing Manji the



deathblow that he has requested, inserts 'sacred bloodworms' into his bloodstream, that our hero is both gifted and cursed with immortality, and the film shifts from monochrome to colour. Cut to fifty years later, and the ageless, deathless Manji, though certainly no longer loyal to the Shōgunate or to anyone but himself, is still wishing that he could die, and still looking for a good reason to be alive. The answer that he finds to this conundrum - an *existential* conundrum - is in fact the same answer that he had already found in the prologue, and an answer that reconfigures, upends even, the conventional *bushidō* values of the Tokugawa period, looking forward instead to our own modern age - and to the sort of values to which Miike himself might be said to subscribe.

Before addressing that question further, though, let's talk numbers. By the end of the prologue, Manji may have emerged half-blinded, dismembered and near dead from his encounter with the gang of bounty hunters, but he has also, single-handedly (in more than one sense), slain them all to a man. The quantity of his victims is not made explicit at this point - but later in the film, a hint at the number will come in a nickname that Manji has acquired: the 'Hundred Killer'. The number is significant, for *Blade of the Immortal* is also Miike's 100th feature. Of course, by the film's end, Manji will have killed many more - much as, by the time you are reading this, the prolific Miike will already have made more films. The point, though, is the symmetry, as Manji's massacres and Miike's filmmaking momentarily converge by numbers, forging a close connection between martial and film artist. Reflected in the image of this reluctant master swordsman who keeps clocking up dizzying numbers of kills, we glimpse a director already legendary for his rate of productivity, as perhaps he too, in his own mastered medium, dramatically interrogates why he should go on.

'Not Again': *Seppuku*, Immortality And Cyclicity

Fifty-two years after his little sister Machi was killed before his very eyes, Manji is brooding alone outside his riverside hovel, wishing he could just die, when he is approached by young, determined tomboy Rin Asano. She is seeking vengeance against Kagehisa Anotsu (Sōta Fukushi) and his Ittō-ryū for the murder of her father (who was head of a rival school) two years earlier, as well as for the rape and abduction of her mother; and she has, on the advice of Yaobikuni, sought out Manji's services as a bodyguard. Manji is reluctant to do Rin's killing, or any killing at all, in a world where he no longer trusts his instincts to tell good from evil. Two things, however, persuade him to help Rin: the first is her (honest) claim to be otherwise helpless ("I'm desolate - there were so many of them"); and

the second, more importantly, is her close physical resemblance to Machi (she is even played by the same actress). Manji cannot resist repeating the past and abandoning his death wish to protect another young ward - even though that places him once more in the same hell in which we found him at the film's beginning. "Not again," he will say near the end of *Blade of the Immortal*, as he finds Rin, like Machi before, taken hostage by an unscrupulous bounty hunter. Yet perhaps, this time around, Manji can rewrite history.

Manji's desire to die, stated in the quote that opened this piece, and restated many times in the film, is also a repetition from Miike's own previous ventures into *jidaigeki* (Edo period dramas with swordplay). For both *13 Assassins* (*Jūsan-nin no shikaku*, 2010) and *Hara-Kiri: Death of a Samurai* (*Ichimei*, 2011), themselves reiterations of, respectively, Eiichi Kudō's *13 Assassins* (*Jūsan-nin no shikaku*, 1963) and Masaki Kobayashi's *Harakiri* (*Seppuku*, 1962), revolve around suicide as a viable route to honour for samurai caught in an unjust system. *13 Assassins* opens with a wronged samurai committing a public act of *seppuku* to disgrace a corrupt and sadistic Lord, and the rest of the film concerns a samurai suicide mission to assassinate the Lord. The convoluted narrative of *Hara-Kiri: Death of a Samurai* shows a noble samurai clan brought down by the suicidal actions of a *rōnin* far more honourable than its own members. With *Blade of the Immortal*, Miike resurrects this theme, but complicates it with the addition of a protagonist who dies very, very hard indeed. With the option of *seppuku* effectively unavailable (the blood worms would ensure Manji's painful recovery, over and over), our hero must find a way to live, rather than die, with honour, even as he exists in much the same corrupted universe that all Miike's other samurai characters have occupied.



Miike has visited immortality before too. In his absurdist epic *Izo* (2004), the protagonist is all at once the undying spirit of historic samurai Izo Okada (executed in 1865), “an unknown disruption in the system who appears occasionally”, “a loathsome nonsense”, an abstract embodiment of masculine aggression, and a “born killer” hell-bent on perpetrating hyperviolent vengeance upon “everything that exists”. Yet the one thing that Izo is not is a believable, engaging character like Manji, so that Miike’s return to the premise of the unkillable samurai in *Blade of the Immortal* allows him to retread similar themes (cyclical injustices, eternal recalcitrance), only this time with a story that is palatably coherent. As a director, Miike may still be fighting the same battles that he has always fought, but he is also improving upon his past, and rewriting his own filmic history.

Rebels and Outsiders

If long ago - even before the earliest flashbacks in which we see him - Manji was a loyal and committed member of the hierarchical system that maintained the Tokugawa Shōgunate, he is now a member of nothing. Living a hermit-like existence alone in a shack on the outer limits of town (and on the edge of a river), he is both literally and metaphorically a marginalised figure. He certainly no longer cares for the Government, or for the different martial arts schools (like Kagehisa’s Ittō-ryū) that vie for power around him. He has nothing to prove, and though a highly skilled swordsman, he has no cause to fight - and so he sits out his solitary life on the sidelines, watching history float by like the river beside his home, and waiting for a death that seems unlikely to come. He is an outsider and an outlaw - and, to judge by the eclectic range of weapons that he has stripped from past foes and learnt to use, he is also an iconoclast, flouting the rigid codes and conventions of the martial arts in a manner that would see him ostracised if he had not already effectively ostracised himself. One need only look for evidence to the backstory of Kagehisa, whose family has for generations been sidelined and spurned from office owing to their use of non-traditional ‘foreign’ weapons and fighting methods. Unlike the ambitious Kagehisa, however, Manji in no way aspires to be accepted and reintegrated into the very societal system that he has himself rejected.

Outsider, outlaw, iconoclast - these are words also often used to describe both Miike himself and his art. Born to working class Korean parents in Yao, Osaka, Miike was mentored at the Yokohama Vocational School of Broadcast Film by that great chronicler of the

messy and the marginalised, Shōhei Imamura (*Pigs and Battleships* [*Buta to gunkan*, 1961]; *The Insect Woman* [*Nippon konchūki*, 1963]; *A Man Vanishes*, [*Ningen jōhatsu*, 1967]). A recurring element in Miike’s own work has been a focus on outsider figures, whether Japanese characters living abroad (*Rainy Dog* [*Gokudō kuroshakai*, 1997]; *The Bird People in China* [*Chūgoku no chōjin*, 1998], *The Guys from Paradise* [*Tengoku kara kita otoko-tachi*, 2000]; *Lesson of the Evil* [*Aku no kyōten*, 2012], or non-Japanese or half-Japanese characters living in Japan (*Shinjuku Triad Society* [*Shinjuku kuroshakai: Chaina mafia sensō*, 1995]; *Ley Lines* [*Nihon kuroshakai*, 1999]; *Dead or Alive*, [1999]; *The City of Lost Souls* [*Hyōryū-gai*, 2000]; *Imprint*, [2006], or more broadly a demimonde of underclass misfits. This interest in rootless characters and their alienation from the mainstream reflects Miike’s own early status as an artist working on the margins in television and V-cinema. Even today, when he is a regular at international festivals and has even had films ‘In Competition’ at Cannes (*Hara-Kiri* and *Shield of Straw* [*Wara no tate*, 2013]), he continues to work in genres that are deemed beyond the pale of prestige cinema, and his films are renowned for their power to shock respectable audiences with their violent excess and transgressive themes.



Manji may have removed himself from society, but that is not to say that he lacks all values. On the contrary, he is repelled by sadism (like that of the bounty hunter Shira, played by Hayato Ichihara), he shares with Kagehisa and Rin a disdain for those who depend on greater numbers to defeat an enemy, and he despises those whose motives for killing are merely mercenary (Shira again). Thrown into moral confusion by a killing that he once carried out on the orders of his own corrupt master, Manji now frets over how to determine whether an opponent is good or bad - but Rin, like Machi before her, gives Manji a simple moral imperative: stand by those who are dispossessed and desolate, and take on, even to the death, anyone who is trying to kill them. Manji will find that it is, after all, worth living for these principles, and so he transforms into an ever-lasting champion of the underdog. Meanwhile Miike, himself a defender of outsiders, takes pains to characterise the epicene Kagehisa - the film's nominal villain - as equally a victim of exclusion and injustice, with vengeful motives of his own to match those that Rin harbours against him. Here vendettas, passed down from generation to generation, may seem as never-ending as the forces of dynastic oppression and the conservative apparatuses of state - but likewise Manji's spirit of rebellious subversion (which he shares with Miike's filmmaking) can never truly die. Bookended by two spectacularly mounted parallel fight sequences, and filled with engrossing, often slyly funny incidents and memorably cartoonish characters, *Blade of the Immortal* finds a way to accommodate a worthwhile life in hell.

Anton Bitel is a freelance film critic, specialising in horror and cinema of the Far East. He blogs at projectedfigures.com







ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Blade of the Immortal is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with 5.1 audio.
The film was prepared in High Definition by Hanway Films and delivered to Arrow Films.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by James Blackford
Executive Producers Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni
Technical Producer James White
Production Coordinator Liane Cunje
QC Manager Nora Mehenni
Blu-ray Mastering Digital Cinema United
Artwork The Entertainment Agency
Design Obviously Creative

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Anton Bitel, Zoe Flower, Ian Froggatt-Masri, Tom Grievson, Alainée Kent,
Tom Mes, Takashi Miike, Anthony Nield, Shuko Noguchi, Jon Sadler,
Tom Stewart, Jeremy Thomas



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