



# KOKUHO

BY SANG-IL LEE

QUIN7AINE

DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT  
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BY SANG-IL LEE

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Nagasaki, 1964 – After the death of his father, the leader of a yakuza gang, 14-year-old Kikuo is taken under the wing of a famous Kabuki actor. Alongside Shunsuke, the actor's only son, he decides to dedicate himself to this traditional form of theatre. For decades, the two young men grow and evolve together — from acting school to the grandest stages — amid scandals and glory, brotherhood and betrayals... One of them will become the greatest Japanese master of the art of Kabuki.



## LEE SANG-IL'S STATEMENT

About 15 years ago, I had the idea of making a movie about *onnagata* [male actors who play female characters] in kabuki performances. I did a lot of research and got deeper into the world of kabuki. In retrospect, maybe my film, **KOKUHO**, emerged from this early conception. Originally, I intended to write a story modelled on an actual actor, but I didn't know where to go from there. At the time, the project was too ambitious for me to handle.

Then I had an opportunity to speak with the novelist, Shūichi Yoshida, whose novel, *VILLAIN*, I'd adapted into a movie. I mentioned my idea about a kabuki-themed movie and he seemed interested. A few years later, I heard about his new novel which would be serialized in a newspaper. It was about kabuki, which intrigued me. With no objective in mind, I was keen to know how Yoshida would depict the world of kabuki and what story he would tell. I didn't immediately think of adapting his novel, *KOKUHO*, because my earlier attempt hadn't worked out. Then I observed enthusiasm building around the idea of making **KOKUHO** into a movie until it slowly distilled into reality.

I was cautious but I was certain of one thing. The movie could only proceed if we could find an actor capable of portraying the protagonist, Kikuo, as he would carry the movie. Then I had a fortunate encounter with the actor, Ryō Yoshizawa. Without exaggeration, the project would have ended if not for Yoshizawa. It went ahead because we had him; Ryō Yoshizawa is the movie.

Kikuo, the character that Yoshizawa played, would be the spine of the story. If I had just picked up episodes related to Kikuo from the novel, the movie risked being just a catalog of events in Kikuo's life. I decided to focus on his journey of

ups and downs, on the arc of his life and where it draws him and where he ends up. That would shape the movie. As the son of a gang boss, Kikuo's life revolves around the blessings and curses of lineage as he dives into the world of kabuki. That was the plot but what was more essential to show was Kikuo's soulful connection with Shunsuke. There's a ying/yang component to their relationship and their souls appear to meld on stage. With that in mind, when we developed the screenplay, I carefully extracted scenes from various kabuki acts that would symbolically show the highs and lows of the two men's lives together and how they become one in communion.

Kikuo and Shunsuke are immersed in the unique world of kabuki where the art is passed on through succession. Preserving the intangible art of kabuki through generations of actors. My initial interest in *onnagata* probably explains my fascination with kabuki. There is a timeless quality to *onnagata*, they're an androgynous depiction of other. They're atypical, in a class of their own. They're sensual in a sophisticated way and if I may say...the sensuality strikes you unexpectedly. I don't know where it comes from, maybe from the corporeal intensive training? But I was firm on NOT employing trained kabuki actors as dance doubles for Ryō Yoshizawa and Ryusei Yokohama [who played Shunsuke]. I was convinced that having these two actors perform the kabuki acts would breathe life into the movie adaptation and keep it authentic. The character of Kikuo is on a life-long quest to find an allusive "scenery". I've come to believe that it's the same scenery that Ryō Yoshizawa would have seen as he tackled the demanding role of a kabuki actor.







## SANG-IL LEE

Born in 1974, Sang-il Lee is a Japanese director of Korean ascent. He studied at the Japan Institute of the Moving Image, a film school founded by Shōhei Imamura. In 2000, his graduation film, *Chong*, received widespread acclaim. Since then, he has directed 10 feature films, including 2013's *Unforgiven*, a remake of Clint Eastwood's western, presented at the Venice Film Festival.



## CAST

Ryō Yoshizawa	KIKUO
Ryusei Yokohama	SHUNSUKE
Soya Kurokawa	KIKUO AS A CHILD
Keitatsu Koshiyama	SHUNSUKE AS A CHILD
Mitsuki Takahata	HARUE
Nana Mori	AKIKO
Shinobu Terajima	SACHIKO
Min Tanaka	MANGIKU
Ken Watanabe	HANJIRO

## CREW

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SCREENPLAY BY  
ORIGINAL NOVEL BY  
DEVELOPED AND PRODUCED BY  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

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CINEMATOGRAPHY  
ART DIRECTION  
LIGHTING  
SOUND  
CASTING  
EDITING  
COSTUME DESIGN  
CHOREOGRAPHY  
KABUKI SUPERVISION  
PRINCIPAL PRODUCTION BY  
ASSOCIATE PRODUCTION BY  
PRODUCTION PARTNERS

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