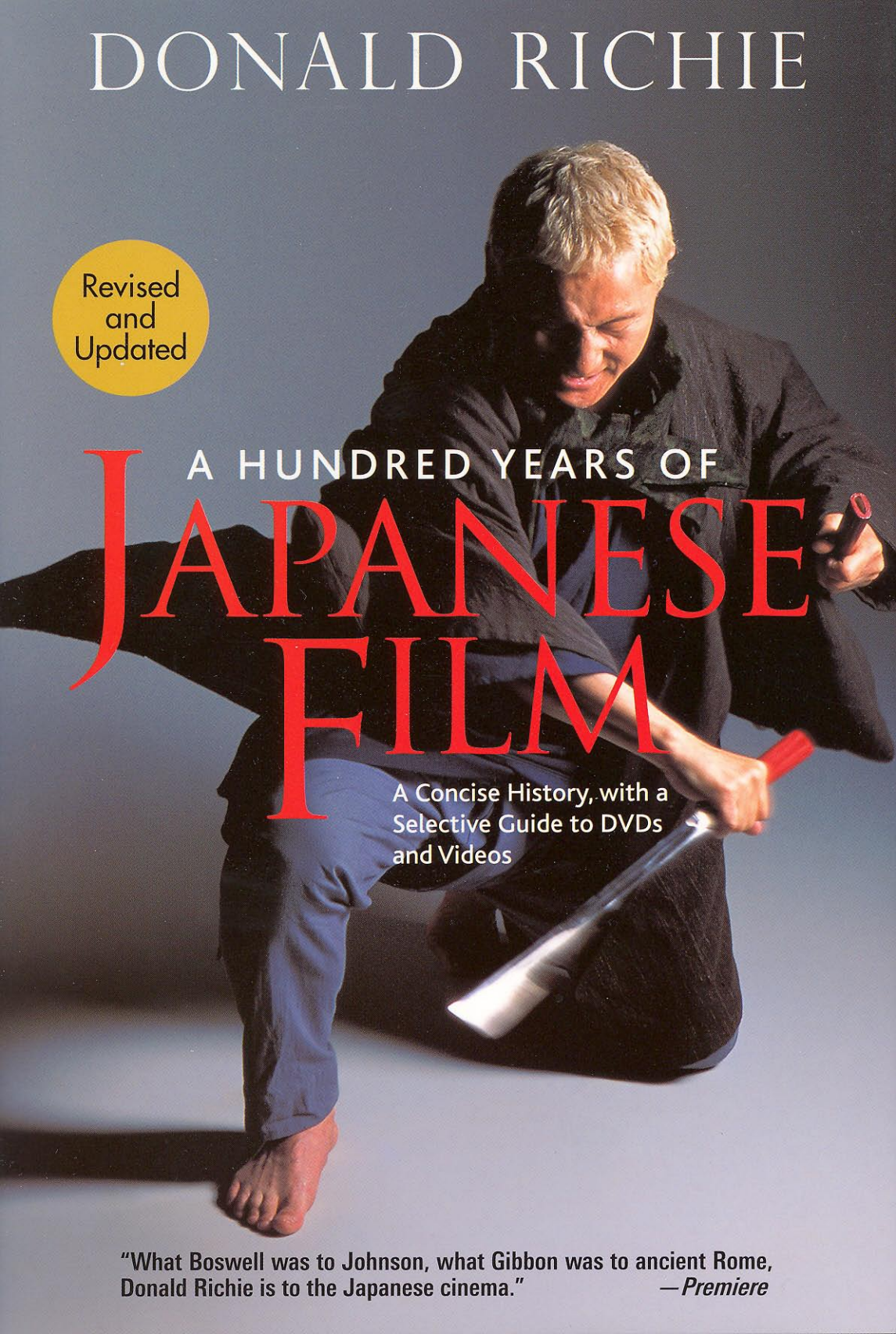
DONALD RICHIE



Revised and Updated

A HUNDRED YEARS OF JAPANESE FILM

A Concise History, with a Selective Guide to DVDs and Videos

"What Boswell was to Johnson, what Gibbon was to ancient Rome, Donald Richie is to the Japanese cinema." —*Premiere*

FOREWORD

Over the last forty years Donald Richie has written and rewritten not only the history of Japanese film but also a history of critical methodology. Whatever we in the West know about Japanese film, and how we know it, we most likely owe to Donald Richie.

He arrived in Japan in January 1947 as a civilian staff writer for the *Pacific Stars and Stripes*. His initial motivation was "more to get out of Lima [Ohio] than to go to Tokyo," but he was soon gravitating toward Japanese culture—cinema in particular—and writing film reviews for the *PSS*. It was an extraordinary time to be an American civilian in Japan. Richie made the most of it, and it made the most of Donald Richie.

His studies of Japanese film began in 1959 with *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*, which he coauthored with Joseph Anderson. For me, a film student, it was a seminal instructive work. As with Borde and Chaumeton's *Panorama du Film Noir Américan*, a door opened to a world of fascinating rooms. Richie's first history used a humanistic model: the film director struggling to be an individual while, at the same time, moving toward what was presumed to be the realistic norm. ("Realistic" or "representational," as opposed to "presentational"—a critical distinction central to Japanese aesthetics as well as to Richie's writing.)

The amazing—absolutely unique—nature of Richie's accomplishment is that he has not simply updated his history (like most other film historians) by appending new chapters every decade or so. Instead, in every later work he has chosen to approach his subject from another angle, rescreening the films and rethinking his assumptions, acknowledging that as history evolves so does the historian and his methodologies.

Richie, writing alone, published his second history, *Japanese Cinema: Film Style and National Character*, in 1971. This volume emphasized a cultural point of view: the struggle of Japanese filmmakers to be Japanese in a non-indigenous medium. It also subscribed to the critical *Zeitgeist* of the time—auteurism, the notion that the director is responsible for

everything that appears on screen. Also, at this time, Richie wrote the initial and still definitive books on Kurosawa and Ozu.

The third of his histories, *Japanese Cinema: An Introduction* (1990), turned its attention to how films were actually made: the multitude of practical considerations that define a single film and its contemporaries: politics, economics, morality, intermedia competition, technological advances, personality conflicts. To achieve this, *An Introduction* emphasized reporting over theory.

In this new book, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, Richie relies even less on theory. He has refined and amplified the approach of the 1990 volume, retained his sensitivity to the actual circumstances of film production (something filmmakers consider important but historians often overlook), renounced his previous methodologies and proposed a new one, one which seeks to oppose then reconcile the *unconsidered* assumption of a native Japanese accent and the demands of a cinematic lingua franca. He desires to show the interweave of filmmaking (the contributions of directors, writers, cinematographers, actors, composers, art directors, as well as financiers). Decline-and-fall modalities are found too simplistic, as is the infancy-maturity model. Film's unspoken assumptions, the hows and whys of filmmaking, the laws of supply and demand—these are now central concerns.

Fascinating issues arise: Japanese assumptions about "realism," the growing respectability of the "representational," the merging of high and low cultures, the evolution of the genre, as well as the demise of the period-film and the emergence of the dominant contemporary theme, in Ozu as elsewhere, of the failing family.

Stepping ashore in 1947, Donald Richie, the Commodore Perry of Japanese film history, was given a unique opportunity. Still in Tokyo more than half a century later, he has—in response as it were—given film historians a model of the modern critic: a man of restless, evolving intellect.

Paul Schrader