

Lawrence of Arabia

By Michael Wilmington

"The A List: The National Society of Film Critics' 100 Essential Films," 2002

Reprinted with permission of the author

David Lean's "Lawrence of Arabia" is an aesthete's epic: a battle film where the carnage is waged on immaculate sands against high skies, where the heroes are improbably handsome and the desert a golden, dazzling backdrop. Based on the exploits of T. E. Lawrence of Arabia during World War I, this much-praised and prized classic can be questioned at times for its history, drama or psychology, but never for its looks.

Few adventure films ever have boasted such astonishing physical beauty. As shot by cinematographer Freddie Young (and his second unit photographer Nicolas Roeg), there's a scintillating clarity in the city and village scenes (done mostly in Seville, Spain, and Morocco) and even more the vast Saudi Arabian landscapes: movielands as haunting as John Ford's Monument Valley: a Xanadu of boys' adventure, dune after dune sliding off toward the blinding sky.

Though the movie is full of sand and heat, we don't always feel them. Lean's chilly precision cools the desert off, kisses some of the blood off Lawrence's hands. I saw "Lawrence" for the first time at the age of fifteen, and for years afterward I could recall much of it at will – especially the long sequence where Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) sees Sharif Ali Ibn El Kharish (Omar Sharif) for the first time, riding through the desert in shimmering heat waves that seem to break Sharif Ali's camel mount into black abstract fragments: an eerie visual harbinger of disasters to come. (Lean held this truly hypnotic shot, in his first cut, for almost twice the length we see here. Later, he said, he lost his nerve and shortened it).

The whole movie is a vast objet d'art, full of grand tableaux, sweeping action, and polished, epigrammatic speeches. The dialogues (written by playwright Robert Bolt and, uncredited, Michael Wilson) drip with irony and foreshadowing. Lawrence has been attacked for the way O'Toole's magnetic performance and limpid blue eyes turn the title character into a mask and a cipher.



Sherif Ali (Omar Sharif) stares quizzically at 'El Arens' (Peter O'Toole). Courtesy Library of Congress

But, if we want the history undramatized and undorned, we can always read Lawrence's "Seven Pillars of Wisdom" or the rest of the film's source material. Lean's film gives us something different: high adventure wedded to stunning visual beauty, artistic excitement married to bloody danger, suave irony coupled with dramatic chaos and futility.

O'Toole's Lawrence is an adventurer who flirts with disaster, who wants to be consumed by another culture. The huge close-up early on where he holds his finger in the lighter flame – which immediately dissolves into the desert landscape – suggests a desire to annihilate part of himself, to become something purer, harder: "playing with fire" in a deep and dangerous way. We remember afterward the quiet delight with which he first travels through the Arabian desolation, the blanched anguish on his face at his leave-taking, his intoxicated glee in battle, and the way his image crumbles when he flirts with death once too often.

If I were a more sophisticated fifteen-year-old, I might have guessed that Sharif Ali's memorable entrance presaged something far more intense. Like many of Lean's other films, especially "Brief Encounter" and "Doctor Zhivago," "Lawrence of Arabia" is, in a way, a tale of impossible love. But here the lovers (subconscious and unrealized, of course) are Ali and "El Arens," who consummate their passion only in bloody warlike deeds. Something may have happened between Lawrence and his desert comrades in real life, but never here. The sense of frustration becomes a shiver under the film's hot vistas, and when Lawrence is raped and sodomized in the film, by the oily Turkish bey played by Jose Ferrer (one of the "lost" scenes restored for the 1989 re-release), it plays like a twisted fulfillment of these teasing undercur-

rents. El Arens is captured by the beys men right after a scene of sporting with Ali on a spy mission – playing madman, god, and tease. All throughout the film, Ali is both sidekick and simmering presence – but, more important, he comes to stand for the impossible union with Arab culture Lawrence wants.

O’Toole was twenty-five when he made Lawrence (so was Sharif). He’d acted mostly at the Bristol Old Vic and done a handful of films (including “The Savage Innocents” with Lawrence costar Anthony Quinn, where director Nick Ray had another actor redub O’Toole’s dialogue). But Lawrence remains his greatest role and performance, an incredibly effective piece of anti-typecasting. If Lawrence had been cast “correctly” as a smaller man (like John Mills in Terence Rattigan’s stage-play “Ross”), the movie might have lost much of its impact. It might not even have worked as well with Lean’s first choice for Lawrence, Marlon Brando – who would probably have been wilier and more sensual, but not as heroic and self-destructive. Instead, this is Lawrence as he might have imagined himself: aesthete-adventurer, blond god.

In O’Toole’s burned hands, Lawrence swings between exhilaration and despair, madness and glory, the poles on which the movie pivots. The pragmatic newsman who follows his exploits, Bentley (Arthur Kennedy, doing a fictionalized version of Lowell Thomas), calls Lawrence a “shameless exhibitionist” — but by the end he’s a shameful exhibitionist, an intensely private man who has somehow willed himself into extroversion, toppled over into giddy excess, before his inevitable entombment in legend.

We remember O’Toole’s face, but the film is really a portrait of its maker, David Lean. Lean filmed Lawrence for two years, spending and shooting prodigally. (Sharif Ali’s entrance alone took more than a month.) And that reckless perfectionism is reflected in the movie’s form: the glassily beautiful surfaces, the turbulent interior. Lean is a maker of huge, ravishing, uneasy films, and this epic is his highest achievement — a movie that thrills and disturbs as you watch it; so taut and fine it seems at any moment, like O’Toole’s Lawrence, ready to snap.

Lean is a master of structure and shaping; he began as an editor, for Michael Powell and others. In the 1930s, he was known as the best cutter in England, and his structural brilliance is obvious though the whole film. Its two-part balance of rise and fall, glory and decline, is crucial to the final effect. The complete Lawrence of Arabia is a symphony of war, and its very amplitude is part of its power: its poetry and bloodbaths, battles and reverie, genius and madness.

In “Lawrence,” the idea of male bonding, an action movie staple, is raised to a sublime and scary level — as if all the politics of the region hinged on one man’s bruised psyche, as if the earth turned on his burned heart. The movie is a stirring portrait of a genuine hero, but Lean’s picture also critiques what it celebrates, and, in part, undermines what it exalts. That’s one reason why it’s still one of the great movie epics: an archetypal daydream of bravery and disaster.

See it once — as I did in my teens — and it stays with you: the dunes, the sky, the search for the lost man; “It is written...”; Anthony Quinn as the hawk-faced Auda Abu Tayi crying, “I am a river to my people!”; the screaming desert raid on the train (shot by a first-class second-untill director, Andre de Toth); El Arens’s white robes gleaming in the sun, then stained with blood and betrayal; the taking of Aqaba — and, at the very beginning of the movie, that still, overhead shot of Lawrence with his motorcycle, of the green English countryside and of Lawrence’s wild ride on his Vincent Black Shadow motorcycle — a burst of boyish exhilaration that ends in twisted wreckage on a quiet country English road.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Michael Wilmington has served as movie critic at the L. A. Weekly, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, and cable channel CLTV. He currently writes for Movie City News, and is also co-author of the book “John Ford.”