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Review of Doctor Zhivago

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Doctor Zhivago (Blu-ray)

(Warner Home Video, 5.4.2010)

When David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* was released in December 1965, it was considered a bit stodgy. If you lived in a large North American city or on a college campus, you had access to masterpieces by Antonioni, Bergman, Fellini, Godard, Kurosawa, Ray, Resnais, Truffaut, and Visconti, films that showed there was a way of considering what movies could be beyond Rock-and-Doris sex comedies and the torpid social commentary of Mr. Stanley Kramer. Even though the Hollywood revolution spurred by *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate* was still two years away, the influence of foreign filmmakers could be seen in Lean's native Britain in such films as Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Tony Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, Lindsay Anderson's *This Sporting Life*, Joseph Losey's *The Servant*, and Richard Lester's *A Hard Day's Night*.

With *Lawrence of Arabia* Lean had just made a nearly perfect film, a psychological study as epic. Reteaming with the same screenwriter, Robert Bolt, cinematographer, Freddie Young, and composer, Maurice Jarre, along with two of the stars, Omar Sharif and Alec Guinness, of his previous masterpiece, Lean hoped to recreate the magic of *Lawrence of Arabia*, but in the context of the time, *Doctor Zhivago* seemed quaintly old-fashioned.

As time passed, however, taking us into the rom-com era (welcome back, Rock and Doris), *Doctor Zhivago* has come to exemplify an elegant classicism. What had once seemed too studied, too self-consciously stately, is now a textbook example of how to tell a story with depth and scope. As irascible as he could be, Lean knew how to direct actors, getting their best performances ever from Sharif and Rod Steiger, extraordinary ones from Guinness, Tom Courtenay, Ralph Richardson, and, especially, Klaus Kinski. Julie Christie is limited somewhat by having to play a concept more than a character, but Lean and Young knew to photograph her to make her into a romantic ideal.

These Russians are not only the products of a flawed social system replaced by one with different flaws; they are the results of their landscape. Lean and Young use the scenery (Spain and Finland giving Oscar-worthy performances as Russia) not just for beautiful pictures but for forbidding ones as well: corpses strewn about the burnt ground, snow and ice threatening to end Zhivago's journey home. As Lean demonstrates in films as different as *Brief Encounter*, *Hobson's Choice*, and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, he knows how to frame shots and pace films as well as anyone not named Hitchcock. One wonders what he could have done with a true thriller.

While *Doctor Zhivago* is full of pretty pictures (the flowers, the sleigh rides, Christie), these alone do not make the release of this Blu-ray notable. Blu-ray captures more details in the many darker images: the filing out of the workers in the opening scene (John Box's set design capturing the strength, austerity, and impersonality of the Soviet

Union), the candle-lit frosted-over window behind which Courtenay reads Christie's letter of confession, the crammed train car.

Blu-ray also calls more attention to Lean's use of red: the lush restaurant where Steiger takes then-innocent Christie, the signs of the protestors, Christie's scarlet-woman dress. These reds were a bit soft in the previous DVD version but are quite dramatic here, though the blood on the snow looks too much like paint. Considerable critical attention has been paid to the way Sharif and Christie have been lit to dramatize the emotions of their eyes, and Blu-ray makes more intense the bewilderment expressed by Sharif's huge brown ones and the despair, love, and resolve in Christie's ice-blue eyes.

The extras include a 40-page illustrated booklet with information about Lean, Boris Pasternak, the actors, and the Russian Revolution, a CD sampler of Jarre's music, and, with one exception, holdovers from the previous DVD. These include a commentary by Sharif, Steiger, and Sandra Lean, the director's widow, an hour-long making-of, and featurettes from 1965. Those who adore Christie (and who doesn't, I want to know?) should skip the interview with her petulant younger self.

The new extra is 40 minutes of analysis by directors Martin Campbell, Taylor Hackford, Nicholas Meyer, Gary Ross, and Mikael Salomon, producer Kathleen Kennedy, and Lean biographer Steven Silverman. Not an A-list bunch, but Laurent Bouzereau, the D. W. Griffith of DVD extras, assembles their comments, mostly in the film's chronological order, into a surprisingly knowledgeable explication. While there are some what-Lean-means-to-me moments, the visual and thematic analysis, especially by Hackford, of individual scenes is good enough at times to make you want to watch the film again.—
Michael Adams