DAVID LEAN: A SELF-PORTRAIT

DAVID LEAN rose to fame in a British cinema dominated by the literary adaptation executed with taste, intelligence and expert craftsmanship. His first directorial assignment came when he was just 23 years old. Every element of his work was infused with personal responsibility that he felt Lean would fulfill. Indeed, the protege executed this task with such sympathy that the subsequent Lean films, This Happy Breed and Blithe Spirit, were discussed in the press as though they were totally the creations of Lean.

Lean's first real recognition as director came with Brief Encounter, another Coward adaptation. Lean wrote (in collaboration with Ronald Neame and Anthony Havelock-Allan) his own cowritten screenplay for Brief Encounter, and in expanding the original gave it a stronger dramatic construction and a more novelistic flavor. Brief Encounter is one of the best-loved films of all time; it is a good story told movingly. It is also the summation of British film-making of that era.

This film involves an ordinary couple who come to realize that the passing of their adulterous affair is not strong enough to sense their moral responsibility. Brief Encounter represents a high achievement in that peculiarly British form of slice-of-life realism and affords for the American opening of a poetic Lawrence —these alone would make their respective films worth seeing.

The fact remains that Lean was trained in the technical side of film, and, as adept as he proved himself in handling the intimate, lonely story of an English family, he also has a talent for the American opening of poetic Lawrence—these alone would make their respective films worth seeing.

The test of Lean’s films is whether he developed those skills required for expert manipulation of the medium’s technology. Asked once by an interviewer if his Dickens adaptations fulfilled his history is taking place just off camera, and the characters are never quite aware of the havoc it is causing in their living rooms. The approach is not really so different from the one chosen by Lean and scriptwriter Robert Bolt for their adaptation of Dr. Zhivago: there, the personal story of Zhivago and Lara is brought forward while the Russian Revolution is subordinated to a background that impinges upon the course of their love. In Lean’s other epics, Lawrence of Arabia and Bridge on the River Kwai, more of the spectator sweep of the camera is allowed for, and the style is much more boyish for subjects that would permit him to develop those skills required for expert manipulation of the medium’s technology. Asked once by an interviewer if his Dickens adaptations fulfilled his hopes, Lean answered that he had “just done it.” The more or less as a change from the Coward type of story.” Lean undoubtedly was seeking something on a larger scale, a story with the kind of built-in challenge presented by the battlefield sequences of In Which We Serve, for which he had built a full-scale model of an English destroyer beforehand and permitted a list of fifteen degrees in any direction. The battlefield scenes were not the only scenes that Lean was to bring to life in this epic. Lawrence of Arabia, and Bridge on the River Kwai, each of which was years in preparation, and each is a marvel of technological expertise. Every frame seems to have been carefully studied, both as to the imposition is history and the eye and the part. Each is a marvel of composition and over-all production. John Simon has said of a certain scene in Lawrence of Arabia that it combines “pictorial beauty, suspenseful cutting, profound emotion, extreme restraint to achieve a sense of emotional release in a sequence of climaxes, of the two or three greatest bits of movie architecture ever.”

These states, monumental films still exhibit that “so-called ‘restraint’” which Lean once called “the natural national characteristic” of the British, a quality which could hardly be used to describe most of contemporary directors.

In Lawrence of Arabia, and continues through Ryan’s Daughter, Lean has assured scripts with literate dialogue, strong settings, and house-teller stories. In his latest film, Bridge on the River Kwai, Lean attempted to blend two genres of cinema: intimate, finely detailed personal stories and spectacular events—battles, train explosions, revolutions, tempests—and he has managed to guide his films through both modes with a success that has eluded other contemporary directors.

Leonard, David’s father, was a Czechoslovakian who had come to Britain to escape the German occupation. He died when David was only two years old. David Lean’s career in film began in 1928 when he went to work as an apprentice at the Gainsborough Studios outside London. Associated with the many facets of British film production, Lean’s name has been affiliated with such films as Pygmalion, 45th Parallel, and One of Our Aircraft Is Missing.

1942—In Which We Serve (co-directed with Noël Coward)
1944—This Happy Breed
1944—Blithe Spirit
1945—Brief Encounter
1946—Great Expectations
1948—Oliver Twist
1949—The Passionate Friends
1950—Madeleine
1952—Breaking the Sound Barrier (also known as Breaking Through the Sound Barrier)
1953—Hobson’s Choice
1955—Summertime (also known as Summer Madness)
1957—The Bridge on the River Kwai
1962—Lawrence of Arabia
1965—Dr. Zhivago
1970—Ryan’s Daughter

DAVID LEAN FILMOGRAPHY

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A THOMAS CRAVEN FILM CORPORATION PRODUCTION

8mm color sound, 60 minutes
Price: $500.00; Rental: $40.00

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