

## Little Buddha

With *Little Buddha*, Italian Bernardo Bertolucci completes what he calls a trilogy of "Oriental" films. His epic on contemporary China, *The Last Emperor*, won nine Academy Awards and did boffo box office in 1987; his take on a profane North Africa, *The Sheltering Sky*, puzzled or put off moviegoers and disappeared quickly. Now, with *Little Buddha*, he takes a crack at the Indian subcontinent while telling the story of The Enlightened One with a contemporary twist.

Bertolucci is in the excellent company of other great European directors--Jean Renoir, David Lean, and Louis Malle--who were drawn to India and its exotic look and its vast, incomprehensible scale. His approach to his material is as a novice coming to the new faith, and he uses the device of a story told to a child as his mechanism. This is a primer on the unfamiliar (to Western minds) odyssey of the Buddha, about whom Bertolucci hopes to achieve a tone of reverence. This reviewer found the primer variably instructive and found reverence most often in the film's glorious look and superlative color (in scenes shot in Bhutan and Nepal).

*Little Buddha* runs on two tracks. The first, contemporary one, concerns the search by Tibetan monks (displaced to Bhutan) for a young child believed to be the reincarnation of an important lama, a search that improbably takes their leader, Lama Norbu (Ying Ruo Cheng), to Seattle to check out nine-year-old Jesse Conrad (Alex Wiesendanger). Jesse's parents, Lisa and Dean (Bridget Fonda and pop singer Chris Isaak), are understandably mystified and troubled by the prospect of their son as a religious talisman, but, after some agonizing, allow him to go to Bhutan with his father and Lama Norbu to be tested. Once there, the monastery learns that there are two other potential reincarnates: tiny Raju, a street kid from Kathmandu, and smug Gita, a young Indian girl. The finale finds that all three children share an inheritance from the venerated lama.

The second track is, indeed, that primer on Buddhism, folded into the contemporary story through the device of a children's book that Lama Norbu uses to instruct Jesse in the faith. So, crosscut throughout Jesse's story is the classic legend of Prince Siddhartha (Keanu Reeves). The film traces his magical birth and lustrous youth, his discovery of the outside world and the rejection of his privileges, his trials as an ascetic and discovery of The Middle Way between the extremes of life. Siddhartha's final trials against lust, evil, and his own ego are passed, and he becomes the Buddha.

I willingly got on that second, fantasy train to Bertolucci's Nirvana, but I got off at the first stop in Seattle. This movie is color-coded, and its Indian and Buddhist segments are all rich, lush, and warm like the layering of a sari over an Indian rug. This is obviously to symbolize the spirituality and humanity of the Buddhist ideal, and it is in pointed contrast to the segments in Seattle, almost all shot with a range of blue filters which make this normally attractive city look like it's been dipped in a sapphire ice pack. Unfortunately for them, Fonda and Isaak

have been steeped in this gelid mix, too, and they seem stiff and uncertain as Jesse's parents. Their characters are weak and underwritten (Isaak is a cipher), and their concerns and motivations seemed trumped up or false. Not to worry, because Keanu Reeves gives a decent impression of the often spaced-out Siddartha, and Ying Ruo Cheng--a veteran actor who played a prison chief in *The Last Emperor*--is an Oriental teddy bear.

For me, the real star of *Little Buddha* is cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, whose accomplished and impeccable camera both courses over and lingers on Asian faces, architecture, and artifacts. Storaro has been working with Bertolucci since 1964 when they were *bambini*, working on *Before the Revolution*; he does him proud here. His colors can be revelatory--even gustatory--as the eye lingers on yellows, carmines, russets, ochres, golds, and oranges, especially oranges. Like a morning cascade of orange across the Himalayas, or a dark hand resting on vermilion cloth. These and other images seem dipped in saffron.

Perhaps as important to the film as Storaro's camera is James Acheson's superb production and costume design. After all, he sets up beautifully the sets and fabrics the cinematographer must shoot, and he creates some special worlds, such as the sumptuous castle of Siddartha. At times, it must be admitted, the Eastern exoticism gets a bit facile, a bit too National Geographic-ish, since as when Conrad father and son are wandering around Bhutan for the first time and we are too conscious of being in a travelogue.

For worldly, often controversial Bertolucci, *Little Buddha* is his most benign and placid film. It praises innocence and openness, and children are, in fact, its heroes. Rated "PG," there is nothing in it to offend even little kids, although very small ones might be scared by the tests Buddha must undergo. The test for children viewing this movie is whether they can stand the leisurely pace--the pace of a l-o-n-g fairy story.

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