

Document Citation

Title	Get small
Author(s)	Dennis Harvey
Source	<i>San Francisco Bay Guardian</i>
Date	1999 Jun 09
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	83
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Besieged, Bertolucci, Bernardo, 1998



Close up: Bernardo Bertolucci plays miniaturist in *Besieged*, starring Thandie Newton and David Thewlis.

Get small

Bertolucci tightens the frame. **By Dennis Harvey**

BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI has got to be the druggiest director in the pantheon of established Eurogreats. Always reaching for spiritual catharsis via sensual dislocation—with cinematographer Vittorio Storaro usually applying that extra overdose of tracking-shot surrealism—he never quite feels *there* until he's over-the-top. The result has been a career of unparalleled monuments to excess, ones alternately transcendent and profoundly silly.

Everybody knows where *The Conformist*, *Last Tango*, and *1900* land on that scale. Ditto such embarrassments-of-a-rich-auteur as *Little Buddha* and *Stealing Beauty*. (I'll leave *Last Emperor* out to dry by jury as the most altered epic David Lean never made.) Most sane viewers place much-laughed-at *La luna* and majority-loathed *Sheltering Sky* in the queasy middle, though they both light *my* lava lamp. Even B.'s earliest works—when he was channeling Rossellini, then Godard in pursuit of an acid-operatic mature voice—are painted large, as if aching to expand beyond the medium's tidy light-square. Whatever his subject (fascism, *amour fou*, God), Bertolucci remains a quintessential '60s man: convinced that ultimate (self-) knowledge just *has* to involve orgasm.

One consequence of this quest has been an allergy to "small" movies. When attempted on rare occasions, they either develop psychedelic elephantiasis (e.g. *Buddha*, a *World Religions Illustrated* for preadolescent heads), gaga Freudiana (*Luna*), or plain midlife depression (the brutally titled *Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man*). *Stealing Beauty* was much worse—a would-be bittersweet chamber *Lolita* that wound up arch, petrified, and

drooling at Liv Tyler's creamy youth like David Bowie gumming down fluids in the later stages of *The Hunger*. With Bertolucci, it is safe to say that even his mistakes look better big.

Ergo there's some anxiety in approaching *Besieged*—billed as a return to "intimate drama," derived from a James Lasdun short story, and originally planned as a TV film. Frankly, I was prepared to lose all feeling in several digits. If not both arms.

But mixed reviews and any number of gaping flaws aside, *Besieged* proves you can lead a stallion to water and make him drink fluted Pellegrino after all. This is different music from a not-so-old master—something curious, wispy, yet still hypnotic.

The excellent prologue builds wordless tension as Shandurai (Thandie Newton), a doctor in an unnamed African dictatorship, bicycles homeward to find her schoolteacher husband being hauled off by military police—just as he's quizzing tots, "What is the difference between a leader and a boss?" They find out.

Cut to Rome, where "Shandi" is now a political expatriate qualifying for medical certification, room-and-board as housekeeper at the crumbly villa inherited by an English composer. He's named Kinsky—presumably a cineast in-joke that sets the tone for David Thewlis's storkish stunned-hermit performance.

This specimen of arrested old-world development peers at her from atop a spiral staircase. He lives in tapestry-draped, objet-cluttered modest splendor above; she bunks in the water-stained real world below. Making tentative runs between is a dumbwaiter she uses as closet space, into which Kinsky deposits trinkets of in-

appropriate affection (a flower, an angrily rejected family ring). The cringe factor zeniths as addled hermit blurts, "Please love me! I'll do anything!" His "guest" improves a levelheaded "Get my husband out of jail." Humiliation complete: "Oh ... I'm sorry. I didn't know you were *married*."

The slender story might easily collapse around this gruesome unrequited-matchup conceit. But atmosphere—a Bertolucci specialty—proves redemptive, keeping protagonists mostly at a safe sniffing-out distance, Newton mercifully in greater supply.

Kinsky makes a secret project of securing Shandi's happiness, selling off his own—along with the manse's musty treasures. Truce is called. Then bonding occurs, one tiny flourish at a time. A dust cloth slips down like a bridal veil onto the startled spaz. The virtuoso climax has him holding a "concert" (for her, but also some dozen pre-pubescent piano students) that unravels in umpteen poetically comic ways.

There's plenty to pick at: most notably, how veteran Italian socialist-aristocrat Bertolucci's take on his Italian homeland's uneasy ciao to '90s refugee multiculturalism does or doesn't flirt overmuch with racy exotica. But the film is alert and playful enough to squeak past such tight spots. Fabio Cianchetti fills in for Storaro; there's too much quick-cutting within shots (a technique that will soon look as hoary as zoom lensing). Still, the images and complex, subtle sound mix reach toward ecstasy. And the film's shivery little deaths point to one way to age—and downsize—gracefully. ■

'Besieged' opens Fri/11 at the Lumiere in S.F. and Shattuck Cinemas in Berk. See Movie Clock, page 128, for show times.