

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Besieged</b>
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1998 Sep 21
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Besieged, Bertolucci, Bernardo, 1998

# BESIEGED

(DRAMA — ITALIAN)

A Fine Line Cinema release of a Fiction/Navert Film production, in association with Mediaset. (International sales: Recorded Picture Co., London.) Produced by Massimo Cortesi.

Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. Screenplay, Clare Peploe, Bertolucci, based on a story by James Lasdun. Camera (Technicolor Rome prints), Fabio Cianchetti; editor, Jacopo Quadri; music, Alessio Vlad; piano solos, Stefano Arnaldi; production designer, Gianni Silvestri; art director, Cinzia Sleiter; costume designer, Metka Kosak; sound (Dolby Digital), Fausto Ancillai; associate producer, Peploe; assistant director, Serena Canevari. Reviewed at Toronto Film Festival (Masters), Sept. 15, 1998. (Also in San Sebastian Film Festival — noncompeting.) Running time: 94 MIN.

Shandurai ..... Thandie Newton  
Jason Kinsky ..... David Thewlis  
Agostino ..... Claudio Santamaria  
(English and Italian dialogue)

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By DEREK ELLEY

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**T**he butter is spread pretty thinly over the bread in Bernardo Bertolucci's "Besieged," a strung-out chamber drama about the relationship between a lonely pianist and his young African maid in a Rome apartment. Structured in a rambling manner, often borderline risible in its dialogue and featuring a performance by David Thewlis that's eccentric even by his standards, this small-scale entry, which went into production as a one-hour TV film and was expanded to a theatrical item midstream, looks unlikely to steal much B.O. coin outside Bertolucci-loyal territories like Italy once critical word gets out.

Based on a story by British-born writer James Lasdun (who co-scripted Jonathan Nossiter's "Sunday"), pic

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has plenty of potential as an offbeat, culture-clash romance with political undertones. But Bertolucci and co-writer Clare Peploe seem intent on deconstructing the story's interesting elements at every turn, substituting woolliness for clarity, atmospheric for real emotion and an often condescending, armchair-liberal naivete for real political discussion.

Shandurai (Thandie Newton) is a young woman in an unnamed, clearly repressive African country, who's first seen wandering the streets of her village in an uncomprehending, shell-shocked silence. (Dialogue is a minor constituent of the pic: The first real exchange takes place only 25 minutes in.) After a reel, the locale switches to a Rome side street, where Shandurai cleans house for Jason Kinsky (Thewlis), a withdrawn British pianist-composer who's inherited the building from his aunt.

When she's not mopping the floors, Shandurai lives in the basement, where she pours over books in pursuit of a medical degree, listens to Kinsky pounding the keyboard and receives mysterious presents from the reclusive artist, starting with a blank sheet

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of music manuscript with a question mark written in the middle.

So far, so interesting. With music (African vs. Western) largely substituting for exposition, and Bertolucci's loose, mobile camerawork teasing the audience with hints and fragments, the scene seems set for an unconventional romance between two isolated individuals, one a prisoner of his own artistry, the other afloat in a foreign culture; despite the setup, any echoes of the director's 25-year-old "Last Tango in Paris" fade quickly.

As soon as the principals directly engage, pic starts taking on water fast. Kinsky blurts out his love for Shandurai and says he'll do anything for her; she, horrified, demands that he try freeing her husband, a political prisoner back home. End of first major exchange.

Thereon, things go from bad to worse. Kinsky pens a new composition mimicking African musical rhythms and starts selling off his belongings (including, finally, his Steinway), presumably to fund the release of Shandurai's husband. She spends time with an Italian friend (Claudio Santamaria), who's only interested in getting her in the sack, and then gets news that hubby is, indeed, on his way out of the country to meet her in Rome. But just how much real affection does she have for Kinsky?

As a pure romance, the film gives little clue as to the principals' developing relationship, rendering the final reel a pure script device rather than a proper resolution of emotions shown to that point. On a sociopolitical level — one that would seem to fit closer with Bertolucci's beat — pic also skims the surface, hanging out comparisons like master-servant, First World-Third World, freedom-repression, Western vs. African music, but rarely getting beyond a decorative level. (In one dream sequence, Shandurai imposes Kinsky's face on the dictator of her homeland, but this idea is never developed.)

In his playing, Thewlis starts out over the top and stays there, unable to deliver even the simplest line sans affectation or histrionics. Newton, a fine actress when she's given a real script, has occasional moments of interior emotion but is largely a blank page. More troubling, her perf ping-pongs back and forth between at least two characters — a shy, superstitious Third World menial with an ethnic wardrobe to match and a smart, take-charge young woman who's studying medicine in Italian and getting straight A's. Even Newton's accent in English — the vehicle for most of the dialogue — veers from well-spoken to bwana-bwana.

Technically, pic is fine, with smart, restless cutting by Jacopo Quadri and clean, attractive lensing (in both Italian and Kenyan locations) by Fabio Cianchetti, with no special atmospheric in the lighting.