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By J. Hoberman

The Kingdom

Directed by Lars von Trier

Written by von Trier and

Niels Vørsel

At the Walter Reade Theater,

January 6 through 13

Treasure Island

Written and directed by

Raul Ruiz from the novel

by Robert Louis Stevenson

At the Walter Reade Theater,

January 4 and 5

Also this week at the Walter Reade, we have an equally self-conscious, if more impacted, fiction—namely Raul Ruiz's 1986 version of *Treasure Island*. Commissioned by once-mighty Cannon in the same burst of hubris that spawned Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear*, *Treasure Island* features an international cast including Lou Castel, Anna Karina, Martin Landau, and Jean-Pierre Léaud. It is suggestive of the project's homelessness that while everyone speaks (or is dubbed into) English, the voiceover is in French.

Like most Ruiz films, *Treasure Island* offers a surplus of ideas for baroque mise-en-scène and convoluted narrativity. A panoply of outrageous angles, garishly colored filters, and enigmatic, sometimes hyperbolically bloody doings, it's alternately irritating and inspired, tedious and droll. Most surprising is that, albeit updated

and transposed to Portugal, the adaptation is quite faithful to Robert Louis Stevenson—particularly insofar as the Stevenson novel is a nightmarishly sordid, amoral tale of treachery and greed.

Growing up in a half-deserted tourist hotel that nevertheless seems rife with parental intrigue, betrayal, and hysteria, the movie's young protagonist—known alternately as Jonathan and Jim Hawkins—is menaced by a number of mysterious adults, including his mother, and befriended by a host of jovial pirates, most of whom

Film

claim to be his father. At once more lavish and more slapdash than such kindred Ruiz features as *Three Crowns of the Sailor* and *Life Is a Dream*, *Treasure Island* is no less resolutely a shaggy dog. "We are surrounded by stories that are like houses that we can enter," Ruiz told one interviewer around the time *Treasure Island* was shot. "We play amidst these stories, sometimes being involved in two or three of them at once."

Ultimately, *Treasure Island* proves less an adaptation than a metafiction. In addition to providing the voiceover, Léaud shows up as the writer who is masterminding the Treasure Hunt game that apparently takes its cues from an annotated copy of *Treasure Island* and a TV show called *Treasure-Hunting Mercenaries*. In the world of Ruiz, you are what you read. It's typical that one character, who enthusiastically insists on cross-referencing Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno," is thwarted because no one knows what he's talking about. ■

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