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Primitive, Moral 'Nights' Streams Along



Scene from Pasolini's "*The Arabian Nights*."

By JOHN AZZOPARDI

Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Arabian Nights* is story-telling in its purest form, with all the excitement of an adventure and the mystery of a dream. Like his pictures from Renaissance Italy, *The Decameron*, Pasolini's images of medieval Islam are primitive moral tales, transparent, simple, almost naked. The flow of incident pours forward like the streaming of a river, unobstructed by complex characterization and unimpeded by "themes".

The Arabian Nights is one hundred percent plot, and if there is a thickening or a darkening on Pasolini's canvas, it is in the complexity of lines forking apart and multiplying, turning back

upon themselves and crossing and recrossing until they meet again in a single end point. Pasolini's is an art of line, not color, and one looks in vain for a broad colorful stroke of meaning.

Years ago Pasolini's first American release, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, was disparaged by Dwight MacDonald as a Communist Gospel from a Marxist evangelist. But *The Arabian Nights* can be neither criticized nor credited with the heavy breathing of ideology.

The compassion of the Christian, the resignation of the Muslim, the commitment of the Leninist, and the sexual obsessiveness of the Freudian are nowhere in evidence. Without the ballast of Ideas *The Arabian*

Nights is light, bouyant, and virtually empty.

Above all, this is the work of a deeply troubled intellectual in flight from the burdens of committed thought. *The Arabian Nights* is possessed of a willful primitivism and a studied simplicity. And it's the film of a man who worked very hard at a fluid, relaxed style.

The Arabian Nights was shot on location in Ethiopia, North and South Yemen, Iran and Nepal, in a world beyond the freeway, without a single television aerial in sight. It is a living antiquity, a medieval universe whose mud and brick walls have not yet seen the light of the Sixteenth Century. Like Armand Denis, Pier Paolo Pasolini has brought it back alive, an entire civilization,

caught like a living fossil in amber.

For Pasolini, simplicity was never quite synonymous with innocence. Throughout *The Arabian Nights* the exact nature of the director's sexual interests is made clear by an abundance of young men with their members hanging out in full view of Pasolini's lascivious lenses.

To the director's credit there is not a second of giddy gayness, not a moment of campy preening. In *The Arabian Nights* homosexuality is treated as something absolutely natural, beyond contempt or fear or even in need of a defense. Pasolini's treatment of gayness is so clean and guilelessly straightforward as to seem not worth remarking upon. And that is worth remarking upon.