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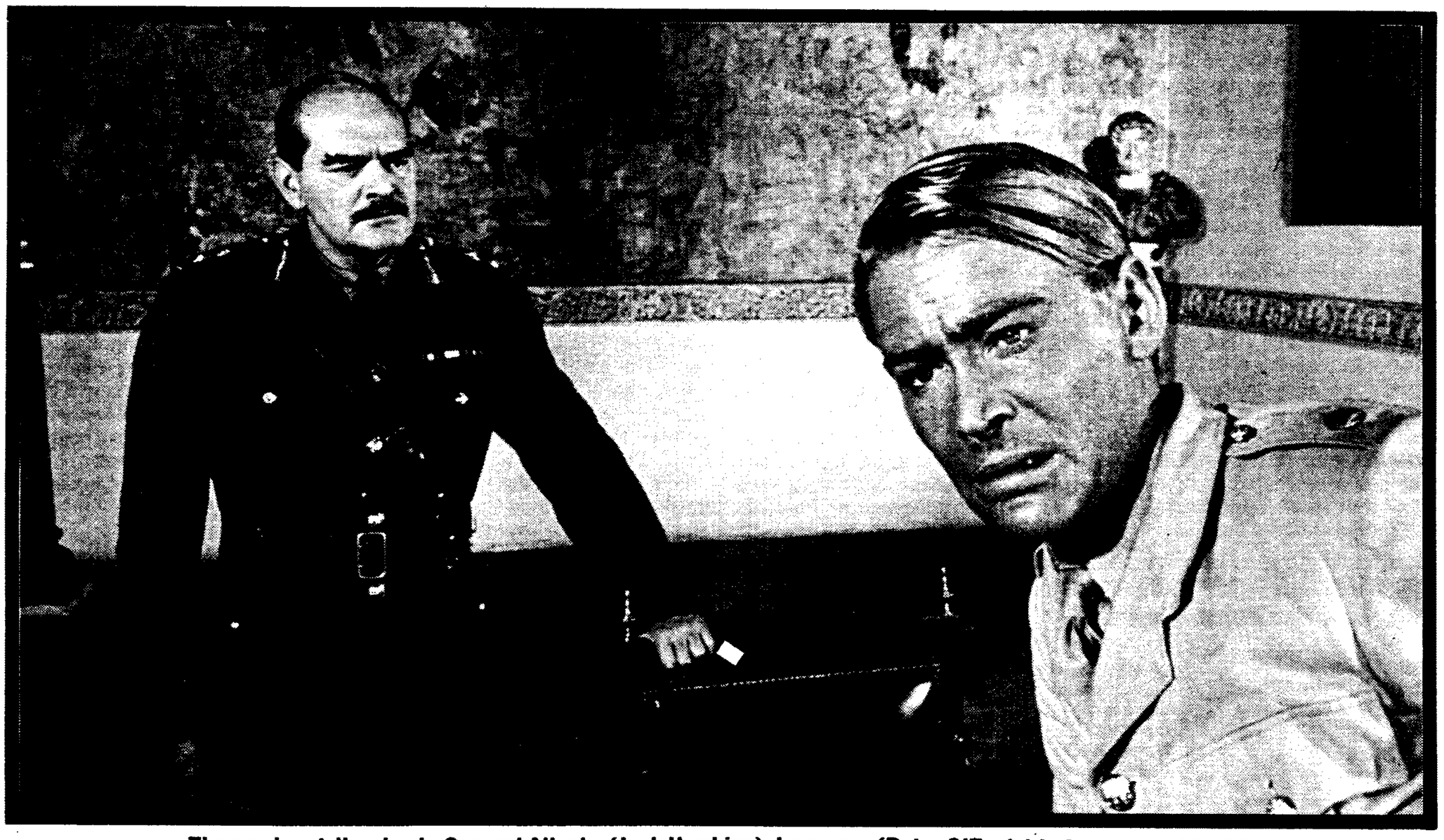

The empire strikes back: General Allenby (Jack Hawkins), Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) in *Lawrence of Arabia*

Radical Sheik

BY J. HOBERMAN

LAWRENCE OF ARABIA. Directed by David Lean. Written by Robert Bolt. Produced by Sam Spiegel. Restoration produced and reconstructed by Robert A. Harris and Jim Painten. Released by Columbia Pictures. At the Ziegfeld.

THE IRON TRIANGLE. Directed by Eric Weston. Written by Weston, John Bushelman, and Larry Hilbrand. Produced by Tony Scotti and Angela Schapiro. Released by Scotti Brothers Pictures. At the Criterion Center.

Old elephants never die, nor are they allowed to quietly fade away. Over at Radio City, the ever-ponderous *Gone With the Wind* celebrates its 50th anniversary with what feels like its 100th rerelease. A few blocks uptown, the restored *Lawrence of Arabia* lumbers into the Ziegfeld to a chorus of awe-struck hosannas. (Meanwhile, I've applied to the New York State Council on the Arts for a grant to reconstruct the Roxy as the right venue for the uncut *Call Me Bwana.*)

Lawrence of Arabia, which first materialized here in 1962 during a newspaper strike and is making up for lost ink, has enjoyed a reputation as the thinking person's epic, and that's part of its canny showmanship. There are more "ideas" per se in any John Ford western, but now more than ever, *Lawrence* seems the culmination of a certain imperial style—assured, nudgy, and spectacularly produced, if not divinely inspired. Although ostensibly English, the film marks the acme of American aspiration. There's more than a hint of delirious New Frontiermanship in its representation of a handsome, quixotic molder of Third World aspiration.

Dramatizing its own sense of entitlement, the movie opens with a fanfare of rhapsodic corniness: a ceremonial drum roll, a pre-screening overture played with the lights up, then the first insinuating burst of Maurice Jarre's "Slave Girl of Bagdad" theme. The hero's fatal motorcycle mishap, which leaves his goggles gently dangling on a branch, segues to funereal harrumphing ("He was the most extrah-ordinary man I ever knew"), then socks you with the great orange sky, bombastic Jarre resounding o'er the Arabian dunes. There's a Barnum & Bailey lyricism to *Lawrence*'s first 20 minutes, but director David Lean and scenarist Robert Bolt can't sustain the clichés—although Bolt's most flaccid lines are characteristically delivered with the flourish of an engraved invitation on a silver plate. (Lawrence to guide, after many hours slogging through the desert: "You do not drink?" Guide to Lawrence, after suitable pause: "I am . . . bedouin.")

At four hours, the movie is more tolerable than thrilling—although it's hard to deny the planetarium vistas, the vast expanse with a soupçon of sand blowing in one corner. (That the desert is a superb special effect is known to anyone who's ever seen Bill Viola's video, *Chott El-Djerid.*) For this, perhaps, we should thank producer Sam Spiegel—who lived in Palestine for eight years during the '20s, at one point supporting himself as a Jerusalem tour guide—and his crony, King Hussein of Jordan.

Under circumstances that would doubtless make an interesting movie in themselves, *Lawrence* was filmed on location in the kingdom Hussein's clan received for helping the British. Hussein had an understandable interest in supporting a project that so glowingly portrays his great-grand uncle, Feisal. But if *Lawrence* is likely the most Arab-a-philic Hollywood production since Valentino's last movie, *The Son of the Sheik*, it's not exactly a treasure trove of positive imagery. Omar Sharif's stellar entrance notwithstanding, the film doesn't stint with the burnt cork: As Feisal, Sir Alec Guinness appears in lisping Semitic mode, while Anthony Quinn plays desert warrior Auda Abu Tayi from behind a putty schnoz worthy of *Der Stürmer*. (It's especially terrifying in 70mm.)

In re-releasing this stirring postcolonial spectacle, Columbia is practicing a form of Puttnamism without the inconvenience of deposed production chief David Puttnam. *Lawrence* offers the kick of empire—it's a profoundly conservative movie that will doubtless be upvalued in the current cultural climate. Released at the moment that Godard, Resnais, and Ron Rice were challenging official pieties, *Lawrence* was, as David Denby puts it in the current *Premiere*, "regarded in higher critical circles as . . . square and irrelevant." (As passé as *Lawrence* may have seemed in the winter of '62–'63, it was not without impact: The blistering desert scenes in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* seem one result, while Lean's influence on recent Spielberg and Scorsese is alluded to by the "special thanks" they receive in *Lawrence*'s new credits.)

Still, *Lawrence* is not altogether square. The most compelling aspect of

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the film remains "El Aurens" himself. Lawrence's image was initially created by Lowell Thomas (played, under another name, by Arthur Kennedy); albeit more a complex individual, he belongs, with Rupert Brooke and Ernst Jünger, among those civilized men who found a perverse freedom and elemental purity in the course of fighting World War I. In *Lawrence*, perhaps, this attitude reaches its apogee—the hero is attracted to the desert because it's "clean." Lawrence's autobiographical *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, privately published in 1926 (the same year Valentino scored in his swan song) presented war as romantic adventure, fought by noble savages far from the trenches of Flanders Field, infused with desert mysticism and an undercurrent of sexual fantasy.

There's an aspect of *Lawrence* that is *Boy's Life* writ large. Exhibiting a toughness bordering on masochism, the actual Lawrence was small, hyperactive, and foppish, while Feisal, 31 at the time of their meeting, embodied for him another masculine ideal: "tall, graceful, and vigorous. . . . His nature grudged thinking, for it crippled his speed in action." If this fails to evoke the calculating Guinness, it scarcely matters; the movie's ambiguous ideal is Lawrence himself. Peter O'Toole was far from Spiegel's first choice, but he appears in retrospect as a stroke of casting genius. Lean and intense, O'Toole dominates the film, his blue eyes blazing out of his burnoose or shimmering in the desert like twin oases. An emotional dervish, he can be fiercely gaunt or inappropriately flighty, waxing vixenish when devious General Allenby (Jack Hawkins) anticipates *The Last Temptation of Christ* by playing a resolute Judas to his wavering Jesus.

Teetering on the brink of a nervous breakdown or gruffly running his desert cult ("My friends, who will walk on water with me?"), O'Toole plays Lawrence as a magnificent cipher—a tormented, madcap adventurer with a fondness for Arab boys and desert gear. His joy at going native is worthy of *Glen or Glenda*. Presented with a royal burnoose, O'Toole launches into a full-scale preenfest. Small wonder that both actress Arlene Dahl and Harry Cohn's widow attended the Oscar ceremonies at which *Lawrence* carried off seven trophies (virtually acing *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *The Longest Day*) wearing dresses inspired by the film. Mooning over his charges, Lawrence is the virgin bride of the desert. In the intermission closer, he arrives at British headquarters in full bedouin regalia, tenderly guiding an Arab boy into the officers' bar despite frantic cries of "Get the little wog out!" (At the end of the movie, the question of identification comes full circle—the hysterical Lawrence is finally taken for a wog and knocked down by a British soldier.)

Surrounding himself with rough trade, O'Toole's Lawrence wages war in a trembling snit, presiding over the massacre of an entire troop. This is not John Wayne. Nor does the film shy away from the infamous incident at Dera'a. By Lawrence's disputed account, he was taken prisoner by an amorous bey and, having protected his honor by slugging the Turkish official, was consequently beaten and gangraped by the bey's men. ("He now rejected me in haste, as a thing too torn and bloody for his bed.") Ripely played by José Ferrer, the bey rips off Lawrence's shirt, fondles his chest, takes a punch in the mouth, and orders a beating, leaving the rest to the viewer's imagination. "Perhaps *Lawrence of Arabia* is one brutal queer film too many," a *Voice* critic mused back in '62, winding up with

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a request for more movies with girls. Indeed, *Lawrence* is a virtually womanless show and O'Toole, running about in bedouin drag for hours at a time, functions like David Bowie in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (another descendant) as the universal object of desire.

Lawrence is certainly the most oddball of epics, marred by the strain of enforced normalcy. Shortly before the movie's release, Irving Howe wrote an essay characterizing *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as a self-conscious literary performance ("fierce . . . shocking . . . agitated") and its author as a genuinely modern (that is to say, neurotic) hero: introspective and ambivalent, half self-flagellating overachiever, half tawdry press hype. O'Toole's performance aside, *Lawrence* never turns against itself. Proudly, and often ponderously, linear, it could be the work of a kinky Kipling. Still, it seems appropriate that the movie should thunder back into view during the trial of our own debased equivalent, Oliver North. Ollie is to Lawrence what sitcom is to grand opera.

The least one can say for Lawrence and *Lawrence* is that together they embody the imperial anti-imperialist fantasy of riding with the Indians against the cavalry. There's a kindred sort of cultural critique operative in the latest Vietnam flick, *The Iron Triangle*. Stolidly directed by Eric Weston and well-lensed by Irv Goodnoff, this frugal production boasts inviting Sri Lankan scenery and a couple of genre innovations—the most important being the use of a Vietcong hero.

Vietnamese have been virtually invisible in most American films about the war, but for long stretches, *The Iron Triangle* is a crypto-Indian-point-of-view western in which solemn VC melt in and out of the jungle foliage, addressing each other in stilted, accentless English. "Good hunting, Ho?" the 17-year-old guerrilla protagonist (Saigon-born Liem Whatley) is asked when he returns to camp, having ambushed and killed two American grunts and taken their rifles and Chiclets. (The second innovation—also contributing to the B oater feel is the total absence of '60s rock. Instead, VC warriors are entertained by a revolutionary dance recital—a young woman, festooned with red streamers, ceremonially bayoneting a comrade wrapped in the American flag.)

Named for War Zone D, northwest of Saigon, "the bloodiest corner of the Ho Chi Minh trail," as beleaguered Captain Keene (Beau Bridges) quickly informs us, *The Iron Triangle* doesn't lack for conflict. The Americans squabble with their allies, the VC make fun of China, Ho regularly squares off against Khoi (James Ishida), the party official attached to his unit. (Superdignified Haing Ngor is the nominal head.) Although the movie's most lurid interlude concerns a hearts-and-minds battle over a sexbomb propagandist (Iilana B'tiste) guarded by a mad-dog French mercenary (Johnny Hallyday), the usual mode is anxiously humanist. Keene frequently frets about American casualties, telling an arrogant SVA officer, "I'm here to keep my men alive, then get the hell out."

This confusing credo is never exactly explored, but when the captain is taken captive by the 'Cong, the issue of prisoner rights comes to the fore—especially as Ho takes a special interest in Keene. ("We've always been told the ends justify the means, but not this way," Ho scolds bloodthirsty Khoi.) War being war, turnaround is fair play, and, in the climactic conflagration, complete with VC Valkyrie and *Platoon*-style requiem, Ho's unit is overrun. As Captain Keene broods over the fate of the VC who saved his life, the final voiceover can't help seeming bizarre. "After they took Ho, I found his diary. . . . I hear he made it." I'm not sure what *it* means, but something tells me it's not this film. ■