

Lean's A Passage To India translates well onto screen from novel

By GLENN WALTON

FIRST-RATE WORKS OF literature traditionally translate badly to the screen. The author's voice sounds in a universe of words; seldom is a director found who can translate an essentially literary art into a visual one.

Happily, David Lean comes close to doing just that in his film of E.M. Forster's masterpiece *A Passage to India*. All the Lean trademarks are present: meticulous visual composition; exquisitely-tuned acting performances; the spirit of place, that celebrated feeling for genius loci that made *Bridge On the River Kwai*, *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago* cinematic classics. Beyond that, Lean has dug below the surface of the novel and achieved the sense of individual isolation that Forster's characters feel in a subcontinent that is a brooding metaphor for the universe itself.

On its beguiling surface, the story of *A Passage to India* concerns the visit of a young English woman, Adela Quested to an India ruled by the British Raj. She is accompanied by the enigmatic Mrs. Moore, whose son Ronny is City Magistrate of Chandrapore and to whom Adela is about to become engaged. The two women accept the invitation of the Moslem Dr. Aziz, who arranges an expedition to the nearby Marabar Caves.

There, Forster's plot explodes,

as both Adela and Mrs. Moore enter caves and react violently to the darkness, which represents both the subconscious and the Hindu concept of the womb of the universe. For Adela, the caves release all of her subconscious yearnings for sexual union with an attractive man, and she hallucinates. She flees down the side of the mountain, and her charge that Aziz has assaulted her sets Chandrapore upside down, as British and Indian take sides.

Lean is entirely successful at the Adela/Aziz conflagration that provides the main narrative line to *A Passage to India*. He is immensely aided by Judy Davis (late of *My Brilliant Career*) as Adela and Indian actor Victor Banerjee as Aziz. Davis is a study in repression; all guarded gestures, and her lines set in frigid suspension, but she catches the intelligent humanity that, in

Forster's view, saves Adela. Banerjee plays the impetuous Aziz like a game of emotional pinball and just avoids caricature. They are an unlikely pair of lovers and never connect. Together they ascend the incredible mountain only to become victims of an echo that is the ultimate leveller.

The mystical significance of Mrs. Moore and the Hindu professor Godbole comes off less successfully on film, if only because they are guardians of a stoic Hindu detachment that is essentially undramatic. Curiously, Lean omits two scenes that establish Godbole's key function in the novel: he sings at a tea party and, in the novel's coda, he dances, surrounded by a tumult of a Hindu festival. Both acts are extremely symbolic. I cannot think why Lean omits all this, unless he thought the symbolism essentially uncinematic and better left to readers. A result is that the film's ending becomes a tying up of personal threads when it should be concerned with cosmic ones. In Lean's defense, it may be said that this is what film does best.

Despite their truncated part in the film, Sir Alec Guinness and Dame Peggy Ashcroft are memorable. As Godbole, Guinness is a bag of sticks and bones, a sort of comic Gandhi who can still explain the wheel of creation. Ashcroft reminds us once again of her consummate skill as a character actress: at once decently English and intuitively receptive to the beauty amid the sordid surroundings.

As a visual artist, Lean has few peers, and *A Passage to India* is full of images that are no less than stunning. The silhouette of Adela and Mrs. Moore's train creeping across a horizon at sunset, dwarfed by the brooding subcontinent, is both a visually breath-taking and thematically consistent image. The barren mountain that Lean found for the Marabar expedition is a miracle; an inhospitable rock that thrusts out of the Indian landscape like the back of some prehistoric whale or elephant. The mountain makes the pacoderm carrying the pioneers seem like a trifle. It is in this continual pulling back to a further perspective than Lean's film

touches Forster's novel at its essence, and the arches and the echoes that are its main symbol of our finite existence are everywhere in the film.

The film is not perfect. The music, for one, seems closer to the Hudson than the Ganges. Besides the exclusion of Godbole's important dance, some of the scenes lack tension, particularly after Aziz is arrested and all the machinery of his trial clanks on.

Mrs. Moore's psychic connection with Godbole is apt to be lost on those who haven't read the book, and her continuation in *Stella* is only perfunctorily noted.

Still, this is like quibbling over the dessert when the banquet has been so diverting. *A Passage to India* is a prodigious achievement for the 76 year old master director, and, should it be Lean's last, a fitting finale to a distinguished career. You won't forget its images, and, once you've seen it, go back to the book. I believe that Forster, who had been wary of letting his masterwork be filmed during his lifetime, might have smiled his gentle best upon this translation.

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CKDU success...

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The most popular programs are those which are specialty shows. Spagnoli cites *Profile*, *Hot Off the Presses*, and *Backtracks* as being the most popular so far. These shows spotlight certain areas of music - lesser-known artists and new releases are spotlighted in the first two shows while lasting musical influences are the focus of the latter program - and are listened to by a large, select audience. Other specialty shows are popular as well. "Jazz and the multicultural shows have a lot of popularity," says Spagnoli.

Besides specialty shows, the other main attraction of the station is that it provides the opportunity to hear unestablished artists from the Halifax/Dartmouth community. With the arrival of CKDU, artists such as Pat Roscoe and The Vulgarians have found a way to reach the Metro radio public - a public which was impossible to reach before.

CKDU seems to have started out on the right foot and has attracted many listeners in the two weeks it has been broadcasting. Even those who were less than complimentary about the station before Feb. 1 have mellowed in their attitudes. Says one Dalhousie student, "It's better than it was last year."



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