

An Oriental Western

By DAVID GIFFIN

It was unfortunate that the first showing on September 30th of the current series of the Dalhousie Film Society was plagued with so many technical difficulties; doubly unfortunate in the case of the National Film Board Short, rendered laughable by a too-slow projection speed. So many of the Board's efforts in the past have been laughable that when one does finally prove to be excellent, it is ironic that the audience be thwarted in the effort to appreciate it.

Viewers who had the feeling that they had seen THE SEVEN SAMURAI before in a different version were probably right — an American company remade the picture a few years ago as THE MAGNIFICANT SEVEN the lines didn't seem as sophomoric as many of the sub-titles in THE SEVEN SAMURAI. The different approach to the same plot is illuminating; whereas the Japanese stressed the symbolic nature of the story, the Americans played up for action. For THE SEVEN SAMURAI is a highly stylized picture. Even a crowd is not just a crowd; it is a symbolic pattern as well.

The picture opens in 15th century Japan, with society on the brink of anarchy. The peasant class is being oppressed and

exploited by bandits. In their helplessness, the farmers appeal to the voice of authority, in the person of the village patriarch, who advises them to fight fire with fire by employing the services of mercenaries to protect them. The samurai, like the farmers, are manual labourers, and as the picture develops it becomes clear that the theme is one of mutual education. The farmers are taught to become self-reliant (well symbolized by the death of the patriarch in his burning mill); the samurai learn that war is neither a game nor a profession, but an occasional art, in which the most skillful are not always or necessarily the most successful.

The picture is not entirely without flaws. The photography of the bandit attack, for example, is rather dull. The bandits merely ride down from the crest of a hill toward the camera, whereas if a scene had been intercut with the camera tracking along beside the horsemen (as at the beginning of the picture), the excitement would have been considerably heightened. This technique has been well developed in the American Western, particularly those of John Ford and his imitators. The Japanese use of the panning shot also (generally used in American films to startle or to give the impression of vastness) was rather

inept. Among some glaring visual cliches were the two love scenes between the youngest of the samurai and one of the girls of the village — the first in the midst of what appeared to be a field of spring flowers (this at harvest time), and the second on the eve of the final battle with the bandits, with a roaring bonfire as background. The shock of recognition with which the young samurai first discovers the sex of the disguised heroine is however very well handled, and much more honestly than in the Magnificent Seven, where the heroin's long hair is the clue.

The merits of the Seven Samurai reside in the completely uncompromising manner in which the director approaches the story. The farmers are not altogether to be sympathized with in their plight; Kurosawa repeatedly emphasizes their meanness and selfishness. This is interpreted as a consequence of their long oppression, and as the picture proceeds we observe what appears to be a fundamental change in their nature. In their role as teachers, the samurai show the farmers that unity in the face of danger is their only hope, and that sacrifice for the common good is essential.

The film abounds with those symbolic poetic touches one generally finds in Japanese movies — the fields of wild flowers, the dust whipping over the earth, slow motion photography to emphasize the finality of death.

Death is clearly a horrible and bloody business, particularly in the final fight which takes place in pouring rain and a wallow of mud. The importance of new techniques in warfare is also illustrated. The bandits possess three muskets. Two are captured by the samurai in the final fight. It is made clear that this is a struggle to the death; neither side even considers that the battle will end before all the warriors of one group are annihilated.

The treatment meted out to prisoners is savage. In one scene, as the samurai attempt to prevent the villagers from murdering a captured bandit, an old woman hobbles forth with mattock raised, grinning hideously. The village patriarch advises that she be given vengeance for her son's life, and the samurai, almost sickened, fall back as the mob advances to tear the prisoner to pieces.

At the picture's end, with four of the seven guardians dead, the leader comments that only the farmers have won, and we recognize that he is right. The wresting of a living from the soil is an eternal process, but the samurai are as transient as the dust which blows over their graves.

Taking Stock of Bond

By JOE GREENOUGH

When Ian Flemming died, many eulogies were written, most attempting to explain the popularity of his work. The explanations provided, contained some drastically different opinions and proved, if nothing else, that more than one writer was puzzled about James Bond, Flemming's major creation. Not that Bond himself is any sort of puzzle-his virtues and defects are all too clear to any reader. The puzzling thing comes in trying to understand how Bond could possibly be taken seriously by so many readers.

What, after all, is so "great" about James Bond? Bond himself tends to be a morally repulsive snob; the villains he combats are pure and usually pointless personifications of EVIL; the heroine is always the same girl and Bond almost always gets to go to bed with her, but not until the novel is almost finished. Even then the sexuality is anything but explicit.

The plots are strained beyond the bounds of plausibility. Each and every one of them is based on the formula which allows Bond to "... get rid of the villain and get the girl." Fleming allowed himself so little latitude from this central theme that once one has read one Bond book, one has read them all.

I have to a certain extent missed the boat with Bond in the above discussion. Literature of this sort is not for critical appraisal, nor is it meant to. Bond

is for entertainment purposes only, and while some people might read Bond for the sex (which just isn't there) and some might read it for the sadistic violence, most, I suspect read Bond for "... the hell of it" for entertainment. I doubt if there are many people who are either elated, or, for that matter, disappointed by Bond. By the same token, there are probably few people who read anyone Bond book more than once.

But, if you must have some deeper explanation of Bond's popularity, I can offer two.

Firstly, Bond is capable of purely physical heroism in an age when such heroism is becoming less and less possible for mere mortals. Bond survives because no one seems to have told him that one cannot be heroic in a machine age — or perhaps because he is something of a machine himself. Striving to escape the crushing by negative and monotonous reality of everyday life, many readers seek to identify with a human who remains nobly undaunted by the restrictions and problems which frustrate twentieth century man.

There is a second reason — which I am unabashedly stealing from Robert Fulford. Today, when the black and white, right and wrong morality of the war years has degenerated into cold and seemingly endless shades of grey, Bond knows which side he is on and why he will win — and that is more than any of the rest of us can be sure of.

NEXT WEEK'S GAZETTE

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Sexual Attitudes at Dal — a campus wide poll

Ben Bella

ed, the aim being to have all the residents of Bidonville rehoused in these new buildings within the next five years.

Some of the Same Problems

One of the most pressing problems faced in Algeria today is unemployment. Circulating capital has been withdrawn since the exodus of the French, and the port of Algiers is practically empty. The men who under the French regime were either employed or busy plotting against the French now have nothing to do. They can only sit around the squares drinking mint tea waiting for something to happen. The arrival of a ship is a break in this routine. Everyone goes down to the harbour to watch the passengers disembark and the ship being unloaded. Independence Day celebrations on July 5 were another break, and at that time Algiers seemed to be like a powder keg, ready to explode.

Before Independence Day all transportation into the city was free to enable the fellahs (peasants) to participate in the celebrations. Thus, for one day the population of Algiers practically doubled. There were thousands of people milling around, trying to catch a glimpse of Ben Bella, the President of the Republic, who is a semi-God to certain factions of Algerians. On the morning of July 5 Ben Bella addressed the crowd for two hours — first in Arabic and then in French. The afternoon was devoted to various official functions. Entertainment had been arranged for the evening.

The Crowd Threatens

When we arrived at the Place des Martyrs for the evening show we found the square already jammed with people waiting. However, when the microphones failed to work the crowd became restless and fighting broke out. The performers left hurriedly, and a riot began. Chairs were broken up and used as weapons against the rioters. Some were

simply flung at innocent bystanders. The crowd drew back in a panic, only to surge forward again for no cause — for a mob has no reason. Suddenly we realized, surrounded by the hostile looks of an all-male crowd, that we three Canadians were the only girls in the entire area. We beat a hasty retreat to another square, only to find the crowd there swarming up the steps of the National Theatre in an attempt to see Ben Bella again. This time we were caught in the crowd. Reason was replaced by emotion. The leaders of the mob stormed by the theatre steps, only to be forced back by the butts of police rifles. We advanced more cautiously, and eventually reached the front. Our group explained to the police that we were members of the official Canadian delegation (a lie) and were admitted.

The performance that evening was by the Egyptian State Theatre Company which had been sent by Hasser to assist in the celebrations; the songs they sang had been composed for the occasion and mentioned Ben Bella frequently. The audience went wild each time it heard Ben Bella's name — which was often. After the performance the Canadians were presented to Ben Bella and watched him depart in a flying wedge. That night the military did not fear that Ben Bella would be assassinated, but rather that he would be crushed by the enthusiastic crowd.

Daily Life Continues

The following day, the peasants returned to their farms and Algiers settled down to its routine again. Posters announcing the arrival of one African dignitary would be replaced by new posters: such as "The military serve the government" "Algeria gives its hand to aid oppressed states". The streets would be hosed down and the garbage washed away. The men would settle down to drink their mint tea and talk about politics and the future, or perhaps the past. The women would hurry by in their veils, some wanting emancipation, others preferring subservience; and, over the years, the pattern would be repeated.

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