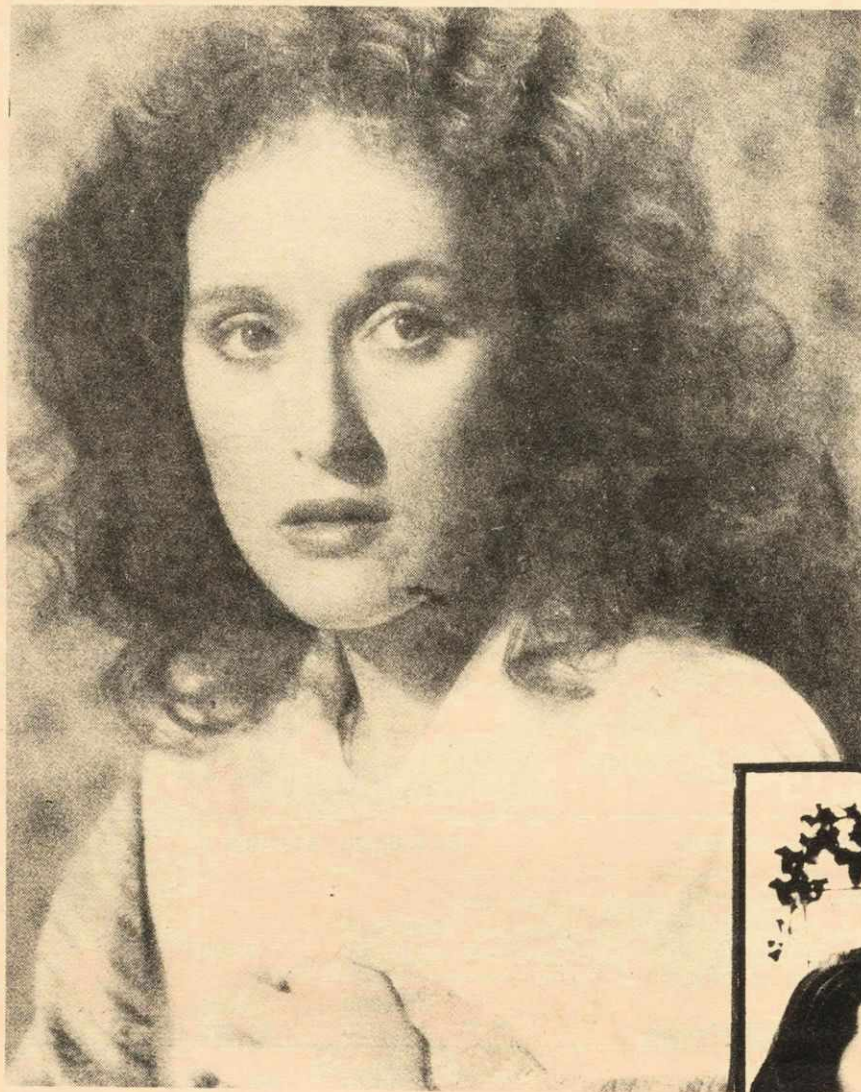


French Lieutenant's Woman is a feast



Streep and Jeremy Irons in 'French Lieutenant's Woman'

by Glenn Walton

John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has finally reached the screen, with a unique solution to the problem of translating the 1967 bestseller's multiple levels to film. The cleverly conceived and beautifully written novel impersonated a Victorian melodrama, with all the hindsight of Marxist, Freudian and Darwinian thought. The device of having the narrator comment on the gradual collapse of Charles Smithson's Victorian morality as a result of a passionate affair with an enigmatic outcast woman was a novelistic one, and to further entice the reader, Fowles provided his book with not one but two main endings. One was happy, to conform to the conventions of Victorian fiction, and one unhappy, more in tune with a 20th century world-view. The challenge to the filmmakers was to put all this on the screen without hopelessly confusing the audience.

Well, the scenario developed by screenwriter Harold Pinter for *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a good one, and happily for moviegoers, whether they've read the book or not, it works. The first thing we see is the beginning of filming on the Dorset seacoast for a movie entitled, appropriately enough, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Right away we are made aware that there are two stories about to unfold. In the background, the American actress Anna (Meryl Streep) playing Sarah, the local scarlet woman, is preparing to climb the wet stairs onto a snakelike jetty jutting out into a dramatically turbulent English Channel. Here she will be seen by the vacationing Charles, accompanied by his potted flower of a fiance Ernestina. Anna/Sarah dons hood, bows her head, and sweeps up into the tempest, and we the audience are suddenly plunged into the film the company is making. Two-thirds of what we see is identical with this fictional French Lieutenant's Woman: Charles is captivated by one look from Sarah, little aware that their confrontation will mean the dissolution of his engagement and the collapse of the social order as he has known it. He will be transformed, from a man of leisure to an almost modern anti-hero.

In the meantime, however, and interspersed with the main story line, are scenes from the present, where Anna and Mike, the actor playing Charles, are projecting their screen roles onto reality by having an affair off-camera as well. The problem with the book's multiple endings is thus solved: Charles and Sarah experience one; Anna and Mike another. One is wonderfully melodramatic, the other all too contemporary. The film gains (rather than loses) a nice tension from the switching back and forth. The modern sequences are a wry contrast to the costume drama of the type so loved by the local Herald critic, but which in this day and age is unacceptable as art. At one point, at a garden party held at

Mike's in London, with but one scene left to film, Mike is asked which of the book's endings is going to be shot. The question (and the answer) is deliciously ambiguous in the context of Mike and Anna's affair, which is also, rapidly approaching its denouement.

Where the film might be faulted is in reducing the political and social implications of Charles' passion to mere drama,

but that is almost like complaining that the film isn't a book. Film transmits its ideas more by imagery and implication; in this respect *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a feast! It is sumptuously mounted, the Dorset seacoast captured in all its startlingly tropical greens and blues, the ideal nature spot for Charles to confront the woman who will liberate him from his repressions. Victorian London is observed in all its Dickensian squalor, and the sleek modernity (in the modern scenes) of the beautiful people, unencumbered by corsets or guilt, is almost regrettable.

The faultless cast gets to carry on in lightly caricatured Victorian fashion, and it is fun to see them in contemporary dress, acting and looking more familiarly human at cast parties and lunch breaks. Jeremy Irons is every inch the Charles one would want, a man drifting along the genteel surface of a corrupt and exploitive age, battling the deeper desires that would pull him under to a more dangerous, but potentially more fulfilling life. As Mike, he captures the state of 20th century alienation, the dejection of loving passionately in the 'me' era, and the humiliation of having to watch the beloved jet off to a foreign culture when the job is done. It is hard to imagine a more perfectly realized performance than his unless it be Meryl Streep's.

As for this new star, everything you've read about her is true: she is a breathtakingly natural actress, perfect in both her roles. She does not grandstand, because she does not need to; instead she gets inside her characters and illuminates them from within. As Sarah, forced into deception and public disgrace by the need to maintain her integrity, she reveals the woman of determination behind the governess' melancholia and feigned meekness. As Anna she is breezily confident, a liberated woman caught for a moment in a contemporary upshot of abandoning Victorianism, the love triangle. It is clear that this actress can do anything. Now that success, stardom, and probably the next Oscar are hers, will she become the star it is fashionable to hate? I think not. She is simply too good to be pigeon-holed by a phrase or a role, and will continue to add to the gallery of women she has already given us in her film work. That *The French Lieutenant's Woman* seems made for her is not the chance achievement of a fraud: it is purest, magical design.

Halifax exiles foreign films

by Ken Burke

To begin with, I don't have a car. Neither do most of my friends, confirmed chickens and committed walkers all. And so being thusly limited in means of transportation, I'm unable, on the main, to visit strange and exotic places like Dartmouth and Sackville Downs. I know, I know, that's no great loss - Dartmouth is as exciting as Truro would be without the Tidal Bore - but sometimes there are reasons to regret this immobility, one of them being the atrocious way that first-run foreign movies are treated around these parts. (That's the topic of this article, by the way.)

Playing at Penhorn 1 (the cultural equivalent of Siberia) right now is Gallipoli, a film by the outstanding Australian director Peter Weir, and I'll probably not get a chance to see it until it hits Wormwood's or the Cohn Sunday night series a couple of years from now. Other excellent foreign movies that were exiled for a limited 2-week run at the Penhorn cinemas were *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*, *La Cage Aux Folles*, *L'Innocent* and *Breaker Morant*. In Halifax, the treatment given to foreign films

is different, but still severely limited.

Whenever a movie dies unexpectedly quickly in the theatres and the theatre manager is left with a couple of weeks empty, then and only then will a foreign film be shown, for a week or two, as a 'limited showing'. Examples of this are *Autumn Sonata*, *The Tin Drum*, *Kagemusha*, and *My Brilliant Career*. People have mostly been trained to avoid anything on a 'limited showing', instead preferring the ten-week held-over safety of a megabuck film to something probably 'weird'.

To be fair, the Halifax theatres that do show foreign films, even on an occasional basis, are the Odeon theatres - the Oxford and the Capitol mainly. Famous Players doesn't see fit to clutter up its big-market Halifax theatres with such risks and so simply chucks them over to Dartmouth and presumed oblivion at the Penhorn Mall. What this treatment of the foreign cinema does is cripple the films' possible reach and almost totally limit their money-making impact. When was the last time a foreign film was a hit around here? You'd have to go a long

way back to find out.

But these films CAN and DO have the potential to reach people and make money - *Breaker Morant* and *La Cage Aux Folles II* are among the biggest money-making films in Canada lately, due mostly to the fact that they are given equal treatment with Hollywood movies in larger cities such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. And of course, there's the odd theatre owner who isn't afraid to book quality, be it foreign, independent, or Hollywood. However, movie fans here have been conditioned to appreciate every scrap we get thrown to us and not complain about the famine in between.

Foreign films will never be as popular as they deserve to be in North America, especially here, until this prejudiced system of the big theatre chains ends. At least give these motion pictures equal treatment, so that more people can be cajoled into going to see them - an amazing number of those newcomers to the wonder of sub-titles will see how unlike root-canal work they can actually be. By then, maybe I'll be able to walk to more of 'em...