

# Kundun, Scorsese and the modern history of Tibet

BY AVI LAMBERT

Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* has finally come to Halifax, a delight and surprise to those who have hoped and worked to see it here.

The movie is an artistic biography of the Dalai Lama's life from his discovery as a child in the fringes of Tibet, to the point when he flees Chinese occupation to India for fear of his life.

Not much of the beginning of the film talks about China-Tibet tension. In fact, most of the movie is a beautiful representation of the Dalai Lama's training and initiation into the role he must play later in life.

For the first hour or so, the young 14th Dalai Lama proves that he has the memories of his predecessor. It might be hard to wrap your head around the idea of reincarnation and past memories stored in a little boy's head, but the movie requires a little bit of open mindedness, and possibly

some background knowledge of Buddhism and Chinese-Tibet relations.

Towards the beginning of the Dalai Lama's teen years you get an air of the coming Chinese invasion. It is made obvious in the movie that previous ways of settling affairs with China won't work against new weapons and vehicles.

Hints of trouble with the Chinese occupation start with a falsified broadcast of the Dalai Lama's agreement to Mao Tse Tung's 17 points. The warnings of a ritual holy man also foreshadow trouble.

There is a scene in which the Dalai Lama is confronted by Chinese delegates to sign the 17-point ultimatum. His quietness and reluctance to oppose or sign the bill is exemplary of his stance for non-violence.

Conversely, the Chinese general in Lhasa embodies the progression of the Chinese attitude throughout the

latter half of the movie. The general becomes increasingly rude and impatient, and demands more food and space from the Dalai Lama.

The Chinese invasion and general way the Chinese are portrayed in the movie is abstract. The first glimpse you see of the Chinese is an angled shot of "Chinese" soldiers marching, wearing their goggles. I may be reading too far into this but it is obvious that very few of the actors that played the Chinese soldiers were Chinese, or even Asian. The soldiers were Italians and Irishmen with whitish powder smudged on their faces.

Secondly, the portrayal of Mao is weak. In the movie, Mao is a slimy, clammy conman smoking cigarettes

and being sly. The feeling you get from this portrayal is of a mobster, not of a vastly popular dictator who changed and controlled the world's largest nation.

The movie's vistas and landscapes are breathtaking. The wind and weather give you an idea of the climate and geography in Tibet. It's too bad the movie was filmed in Morocco, Idaho, and British Columbia.

The children that portray the Dalai Lama are

adorable, and act well for the parts they play. It is amazing that none of those involved in the movie are professional actors, but are Tibetan. This fact added something special to the movie.

The Dalai Lama is shown to cry whenever he sees violence. In any

other movie this would be cheese, but here it somehow appears real. His dreams of the massive death toll of his countrymen is a metaphorical mirror of the strife in Tibet.

The fact that you have to interpret his dreams is not odd for this type of movie, but it makes you question Scorsese's motives for making *Kundun*. Scorsese could have made realistic scenes of the brutality in Tibet. That's not necessarily what I wanted to see, but it carries the shock value that most viewers of the 90s expect. It is just that kind of shock that jolts you from your seat and makes you aware that this is the biography of an ongoing struggle.

This movie, though, is purported to be 'told through the eyes of the Dalai Lama'. It's difficult to question whether Scorsese made this to incite action, or to view Tibet from a non-violent perspective.

*Kundun* is finally on our shores, we need not ask why or how, just when. If a major country, China, being one of the USA's most favoured trading nations, prevents us from seeing a movie, I think it's worth seeing. Besides the politics of it, *Kundun* is a beautiful movie.



## Adventures in Wonderland

BY ERIN SPERLING

The Dalhousie Theatre Department recently produced a contemporary adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*, inspired by Lewis Carroll's classic story. But those who were expecting Walt Disney's cartoon were in for a shock: this version was in-your-face, intense, nonstop and three, if not four dimensional. It was not the cartoon that I remembered.

Young Alice, portrayed superbly by Jessica Bastow, is the subject of abuse and neglect, and is used as a pawn between her warring parents. She attempts to escape from her reality by entering a crazy world, where her alter ego commits suicide

and the Cheshire Cat is entrenched in sexual innuendo.

The performance of the actors as the madly construed characters with which we are all familiar were incredible and very impressive. While some of the characters are the same as the original that we all know and love, many of the characters were given wit, depth and often aspects of perversion or dementia. The dialogue was equally humorous, shocking and allusive.

Favourite lines included "Alice, you are losing your grip on surrealism" and the yell of "I am the Penis!"

So, Walt Disney might be rolling over in his grave, but since when was a Disney production based on reality,

anyway? Whether playwright Jamie Lindsay and director David Overton have created something that is even beyond Carroll himself is another question, but they have definitely provided some explanations to a story that was otherwise referred to as a drug-induced hallucination.

The adventure began with the dramaturgy, a twenty-four page prelude to the life behind the play. It includes discussion of schizophrenia, the evolution of childhood, divorce, doppelgangers, escape from reality, and nonsense. This gave some insight to the whirlwind of action that exploded, rather than unfolded, on the stage.

An incredible yet simple set, a talented ensemble of actors, and a script that gives new meaning to inspiration were combined to produce a play that was memorable, and definitely not made for the kids on Saturday mornings.

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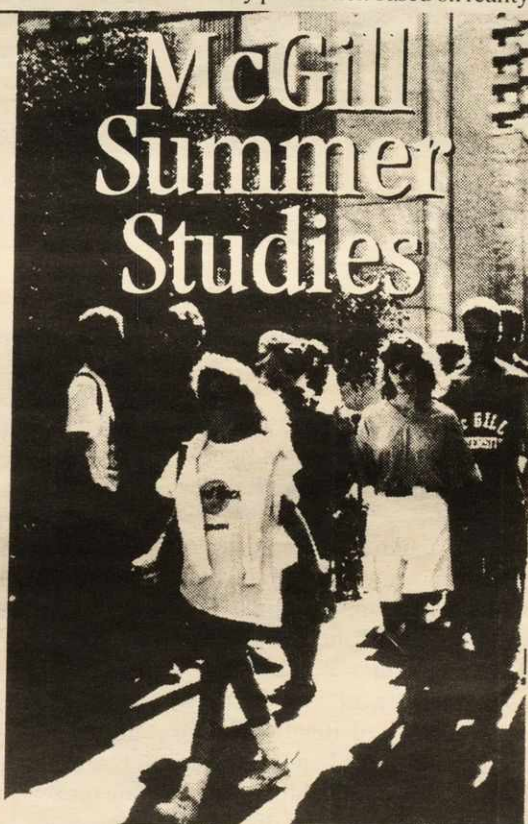
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