

Lantern not a simple family story

by Pedram Fouladianpour

Raise the Red Lantern is one of those films that arouses one's curiosity long before it is released. It won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival last September and has received an Academy Award nomination for best foreign film. It is also directed by one of the most promising newcomers to world cinema.



Gong Li (left and below) stars as Songlian in Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern*. The Chinese film, which has won many awards and international acclaim, is about a poor woman who becomes fourth wife of a wealthy old man.

FILM

Raise the Red Lantern
directed by Zhang Yimou
starring Gong Li, Ma Jingwu and He Caifei
produced by ERA International and China Film

Red Lantern is set in northern China in the 1920s. After her father's death, Songlian (Gong Li) decides to leave college and accept an offer of

marriage from Chen Zuoqian (Ma Jingwu), the old master of the powerful Chen family.

A middle-aged man, Chen already has three wives. Yuru, the oldest who was descended from a noble family, has given Chen a son. "Second Mistress" Zhouyan appears friendly, but is cunning. The third wife, Meishan, was once an opera singer.

Each wife has her own house and courtyard. Every evening the servants light a red lantern in front of the wife with whom Chen decides to sleep that night. The "chosen" wife has many privileges: she will have her feet massaged and she will be able to determine what will be served for dinner.

Soon after her arrival, Songlian realizes that there is a fierce rivalry between the wives.

Zhang Yimou is a prominent figure among "The Fifth Generation" of Chinese film directors, a term applied to the first graduates of the Beijing Film Academy after it had been closed for many years during the Cultural Revolution. When their films appeared in the mid-80s, they won a lot of international awards and impressed Western critics. Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* and Zhang's *Ju Dou* are two well known examples.

Red Lantern is evidence of Zhang's directorial skill. He has a good eye for revealing details, and is very careful to limit our visual perception to the household where the events are taking place. The world outside becomes insignificant.

Zhang blends exotic colours with striking symmetrical images. In this way, sensuality and rationality are mixed throughout the film.

Zhang systematically brings us closer to the four wives while distancing us from the husband. The core of the story, the women's rivalry, gets its life from a brilliant cast which portrays each character with precision.

Raise the Red Lantern is an intellectual film which doesn't downplay its characters' emotions. It is a cinematic experience you shouldn't miss.



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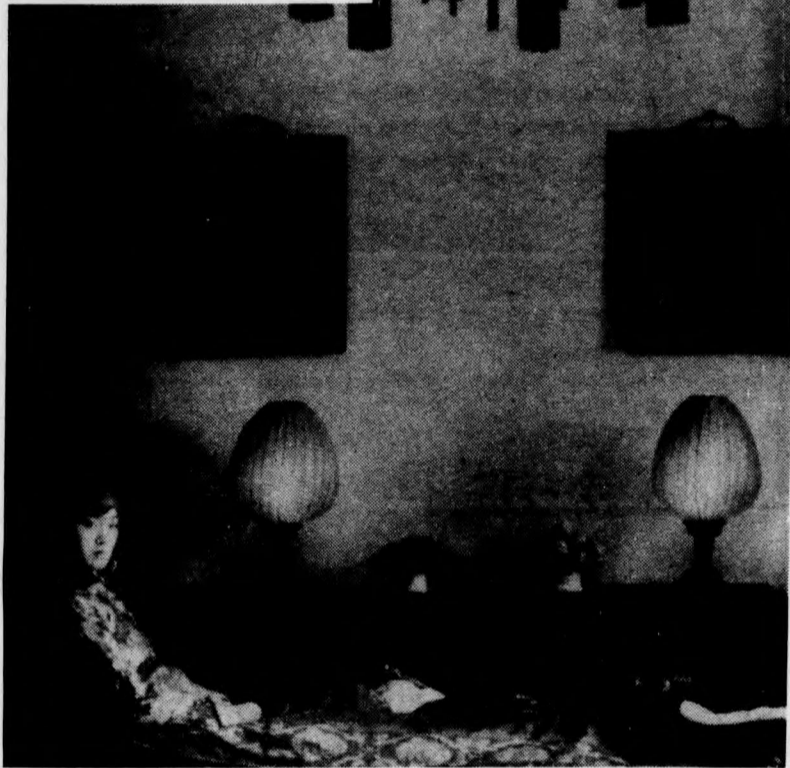
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Thatcher's Britain: they call it democracy

by Ira Nayman

"There was dancing in the streets 10 minutes ago, and now there's chaos."

Britain has one of the oldest legal systems in the world, a system which has been the model for many countries, including Canada. It is distressing to think that the British justice system is breaking down.

But that is one of the inescapable conclusions to be drawn from *The Battle of Trafalgar* (shown on *The Human Edge* next Tuesday at 10). The television program describes how police in Britain have been used against citizens for cynical political ends.

In 1989, Margaret Thatcher's Tory government introduced a poll tax, forcing everybody who wanted to vote to pay a stipend to the government. Representatives of labour, poverty and other advocacy groups denounced the move as anti-democratic, putting voting out of the reach of those who could not afford the tax.

A protest march was held soon after the introduction of the tax — over 100,000 people attended. Although the rally started peacefully enough, it ended in a riot with busted-in shop windows, burnt-out buildings and a great deal of violence.

The Battle of Trafalgar starts with a television news report of the event which paints the protestors as uncontrollable hooligans. It then recre-

TELEVISION

Human Edge: The Battle of Trafalgar
Despite TV Productions and Channel 4
TV Ontario
Tuesday, March 31, 10 pm

ates what happened using amateur film footage and interviews with organizers and people who were actually in the middle of the violence.

The official version of events and the program's recreation are, as you might expect, very different.

According to eyewitnesses, as the protestors marched past 10 Downing Street, the residence of the Prime Minister, police started setting up barricades and streaming people away from the house and into Trafalgar Square. Although 30 or 40 people sat down to protest the police action, they were soon up and marching again.

Then, in contravention of their own rules, mounted policemen charged into the crowd. As many of the witnesses attest, because of the barricades and the sheer number of people, individuals had no place to go.

Pushing and shoving led to escalating violence. *The Battle of Trafalgar* is not for the squeamish: there are many scenes of police using their truncheons to beat people, squad trucks driving through crowds and several people being trampled under horses' hooves.

Protest organizers claim the event was peaceful, and that the vast ma-

ajority of those in attendance were peaceful. The show's recreation of events makes a pretty damning case that police violence precipitated the riot. And, although there really is little evidence to support the contention, it seems logical to assume that the government intended to disrupt the peaceful protest in order to discredit the anti-tax movement.

The Battle of Trafalgar superimposes the profiles of eyewitnesses describing the events after the fact with actual footage, an interesting technique which reinforces the idea that they are testifying about events in which they participated. There are also maps which chart the movement of protestors and police which are an invaluable aid to understanding the moment by moment happenings.

The show leaves you with a sense that there is an elite political consensus in Britain (even Labour leader Neil Kinnock, whose constituency was largely disenfranchised by the poll tax, denounced the protest) that is propped up by violence. This consensus is fueled by the media, which accepted the police version of events without question.

The show has one flaw: made for a British audience, it doesn't explain what the poll tax was or why so many people were against it. Otherwise, *The Battle of Trafalgar* is a portrait of an ugly police state, not Britain's finest hour.



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