

ARTS

# Put an end to end of empire films!

by Ira Nayman

*Mister Johnson*  
directed by Bruce Beresford  
produced by Avenue Pictures

End of empire movies have all the allure of autopsies: nobody really wants to cut into a corpse. Films about the end of the British empire, in particular, are reminiscent of a cadaver that has been exhumed so often there's next to nothing left.

Bruce Beresford's *Mister Johnson*, a world premiere at the Festival of Festivals, is a quiet film about a small episode in Nigeria in the twilight of colonial rule. The film has a lot of things to recommend it; unfortunately, it adds nothing new to the coroner's report.

Mister Johnson, a native played by Maynard Eziashi, helps a naive British judge (Pierce Brosnan) build a road connecting a remote village with a major trade route.

Although he venerates all things British, Mister Johnson cannot overcome the differences in culture and the entrenched racism of the colonial rulers.

Eziashi gives a remarkably nuanced performance in the title role, the focus of the film. At times innocent, at times manipulative, Eziashi's Johnson is a classic example of a capable, intelligent person forced into a subservient position. The character eventually identifies completely with his oppressors, even though he cannot escape his own cultural heritage.

(Okay, that was a mouthful. But, no more sociological insight, I promise...)

Brosnan (*Remington Steele*) is wooden and shallow as civil servant Harry Rudbeck, a case of perfect casting if I've ever seen one. Edward Woodward (*Breaker Morant*, *The Equalizer*) has a small, but pivotal part as a racist



Maynard Eziashi (left) and Pierce Brosnan build a road and confront racism in colonial Africa in Bruce Beresford's *Mister Johnson*. The movie has its moments, but it adds nothing to the coroner's report.

store owner; he manages to give the character more depth than you would expect from such an obvious stereotype.

Director Beresford (who may or may not have deserved last year's best picture Oscar for *Driving Miss Daisy*, as Festival director Helga Stephenson claimed) fills *Mister Johnson* with wonderful golden vistas punctuated by rich greens and browns. It must

be hard to make a film about Africa that isn't visually stunning.

Unfortunately, Beresford's development of the story is more problematic. Most of the scenes are short, no longer than three or four minutes; some are cut off so abruptly that the viewer is unnecessarily disoriented.

In addition, *Mister Johnson* has a strange, awkward lassitude. It is full of event, to be sure, with a

lot of conflict; yet, somehow, there is no tension. The ending, in particular, while expected, should pack more of a punch than it does.

*Mister Johnson* is a charming film, full of humour, with a pointed message about colonialism. It may be one of the better end of empire films made; but, there have been so many, the distinction may not be worth much.

## Homemade Movie shows

by Jim Russell

*Homemade Movie*  
directed by Fumiki Watanabe  
produced by Malpas Productions

*Homemade Movie* is neither as amateurish as the title implies nor as satisfying as a homemade meal.

This bleak melodrama about two Japanese families whose lives are interconnected by teen love and their parent's adultery, plods along for nearly two hours before grinding to an end.

Fumiki Watanabe, the film's producer, writer, director and editor, in addition, directs the photography and stars in *Homemade Movie* as himself.

Fumiki (Mr. Watanabe) is an academic tutor hired by Yumiko (Naoko Kubo) to help her teenage daughter study for the upcoming high school entrance examination. Having met as perfect strangers, the next scene finds them in bed together. True to cliché (and quite often, reality) the husband arrives home early and catches Fumiki as he is making his getaway.

Fumiki's infidelity, brutality and deceit stains his relationship with his wife and children and completely destroys the family of his lover.

Concurrent to this drama and the resulting turmoil, Buntaro, the son of Fumiki, meets and begins to pursue Nobuko, the girl his father was hired to tutor. Neither of the two teens are aware of the full extent of what is going on at home, but the domestic tension serves to drive these already

rebellious teens farther from home and closer to each other.

If this story sounds familiar, you're right. The script for *Homemade Movie* is straight out of daytime television, and just as satisfying.

Watanabe being the lone exception, the acting tended to be wooden and artificial. Even the adulterous wife, long neglected by her drunken husband and ostracized from her home, did not elicit the sympathy that the character deserved.

Technically, *Homemade Movie* was quite good. Shot in 16mm and blown up to 35mm, it suffered from inherent contrast and grain problems but these were minimized by the cinematographer's skill and sensitivity.

According to the press release, Watanabe doesn't consider himself to be a professional filmmaker. Not so. He is not only a wonderful filmmaker, but a one man production company. All he needs is a decent script and the help of a professional cast.

I give it a 3 out of 10.



Bruce Beresford, director of *Mister Johnson*.

## Fire Festival is powerful

by Kim Yu

*Fire Festival*  
directed by Mitsuo Yanagimachi  
produced by Genro/Seibu Group/-Cine Saison

*Fire Festival* or *Hi Matsuri*, directed by this year's spotlight director Mitsuo Yanagimachi, is a

## Betrayed by bad filmmaking

by Jim Russell

*Sleepy Betrayers*  
directed by Beat Lottaz  
produced by Deutche Film und Fernsehakademie Berlin

Jerk gets what's coming to him. Now that you know what *Sleepy Betrayers* is about there is really no reason to watch this film. In fact, there was no reason to MAKE it!

John is a stereotypical womanizer with his reason for existence and a substantial portion of his IQ residing below his belt line. He is in love with himself. He is the villain.

Sandra is his caring, sensitive, creative, devoted live-in lover. She is in love with John. She is the

paradoxical film that mixes religion, tradition and modernized Japanese society.

The story revolves around a lumberjack's daily routine. He is a man who seems to embrace modern day society and accept progress — at least in regard to the way he lives his life — but he also

victim.

No grey areas in this film.

John is bored with Sandra and wants to end the relationship, but doesn't want to hurt her. He devises a plan which calls for him to excel to new heights of "jerkdom," thus forcing Sandra to end the relationship for him.

His plan backfires and (yawn... excuse me) he realizes too late that he really does love her. By then, though, she has disappeared from his life. Period.

The technical quality of this exercise in film wastage is as bad as the story. The cinematographer can't hold a skin tone and the sound seemed to have been recorded on a Sony Walkman.

I give it a zero out of 10.

appears to have some respect for nature.

The lumberjack seems to be indifferent to having affairs behind his wife's back, chalking it up to a man's nature, it seems. Even when his younger co-worker/sidekick is chastised for using a sacred tree's wood to make a trap, he feels that by merely exposing himself, the mountain goddess will be placated.

While it seems he belittles the forces of nature and has little respect for the old traditions, the lumberjack is the only one who refuses to sell his house for the development of a Marine Water Park that will generate more business for the town.

Many scenes depict him pondering the existence of a spiritual force, but the turning point is when he is in the midst of a storm, and he utters, "I understand". These two words prove to have dire consequences in the end.

*Fire Festival* is a powerful film, with various sub-plots that will make for interesting and insightful viewing. The cinematography is breathtaking.



Bleak and melodrama collide in Fumiki Watanabe's *Homemade Movie*