



BOWIE: STARMAN AND THE SILVER SCREEN

Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence

In 1983 Bowie starred in two major films: as part of the love-triangle vampire drama with Catherine Deneuve and Susan Sarandon in Tony Scott's *The Hunger*, and as Major Jack Celliers in Nagisa Oshima's prisoner-of-war film *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*. With an evocative score by Ryuichi Sakamoto, this powerful epic was based on the experiences of Sir Laurens van der Post in a Japanese PoW camp during the Second World War. Van der Post's memoirs were adapted into a screenplay by Paul Mayersberg, who had also written *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, though it was Oshima who selected Bowie for the lead role, after being impressed by the star's stage turn in *The Elephant Man*.

Samuel Wigley, bfi.org.uk

Jeremy Thomas on 'Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence'

I sat next to Oshima at a function in Cannes in 1978 when *The Shout* was there. We could hardly communicate, just smiled, and passed bread rolls and butter to each other, and admired Bibi Andersson who was sitting opposite. Then, a year later, I was contacted through a Japanese woman who lives in London, an associate of Oshima's, asking if I would be interested in his script. Again, I had admired Oshima's films a lot, so I met him in Paris. He spoke very little English and I said, I'd love to work with you, and you should learn English. So he learned English in a year, and we made the film. There was a lot of heart-searching over where to shoot it, whether in the Philippines or in Java, where it's set. Finally, we decided to shoot it in the Cook Islands because it was possible to service it from New Zealand, which made it attractive for financial reasons.

The first script was long, a translation of Oshima's Japanese adaptation of the book by Laurens van der Post. The main attraction was that here was a book about a Japanese POW camp, written by a notable and weighty writer on the subject, which would be tackled by a very radical director in Japan. Not only was the script about cultures, East and West, in a confined and very dramatic situation, but the film would be made in a confined and dramatic situation. I thought this is too good to miss, something extraordinary will come out of this chemistry. One of the fascinating things was that we were culturally at sea, there was no fixed area for the thing.

The book has many things within it, and the key elements have been taken out and used in the script, but not necessarily in the same order. So the flashbacks to David Bowie's childhood, which in the book are set in South Africa, were shot in New Zealand. But it could be some strange idea of what England's like. If one thinks of films having a life of their own, that's a good example. Something has come out of those scenes, giving them a peculiar quality, where they feel very off-the-wall England, something unusual and rather surrealistic. The garden, for instance: it looks like an English house, but it's got tropical flowers. Everything is just a bit off. The garden is an idealised vision on the part of Celliers, the David Bowie character; he's in extremis

himself, after beatings and so on. We decided to use the same actor as Celliers' younger brother in the different scenes and try to get away with it. Try to age him up a little bit. It doesn't really matter, nobody's that upset that Bowie has aged and the little boy hasn't. That little boy was a wonderful piece of casting, his voice was so extraordinary.

People have questioned the flashbacks as being out of context, but I love them. I think they're one of the reasons there is such weight at the end of the film. It's such an emotional film, basically, that whatever one feels about it, one can't help but be moved in the last scenes, which I feel is very much due to the flashbacks. When you cut a scene out of the film, it alters many other things, there's a chain reaction. The flashbacks changed from the very first draft of the script to the finished film, dramatically. Some were edited out of the script, and more were edited out of the film. But that was an element that excited me – what was it going to be like? I knew what the story was going to be like, but the additional factor was what Oshima's viewpoint was going to be.

The only similarity between Oshima and Nic [Roeg] is that they are both directors who are prepared to explore many avenues and angles. They're completely different as filmmakers. But as one is Japanese and the other is English, the differences are as great as the cultural differences are in reality. I don't know if Oshima's style of directing is like all Japanese, but he shoots incredibly fast, at breakneck speed, with a minimum of coverage, which I think is a pretty dangerous way of filmmaking. There's no alternative, you shoot that way and you cut that way – that's how he's been trained to work. It's very similar to Skolimowski, who worked in Poland with a minimum amount of stock, just enough to cover the script, and there's a similar thing in Japan. When Oshima started at the Shochiku studios, they were shooting on very little film stock. And that's the way he's continued making films. Just different constraints and different training. He was not happy when he had to reshoot any material. And he had very little rehearsal. Just one take, that's it. He would shoot in cuts, he couldn't wait to shoot each scene, and he didn't do any master shots. He would start with a close-up then move to a wide shot, then move into another close-up. A few frames overlap, maybe one spare angle, if you're lucky.

Nic's films are much more mosaic in texture and layer, richer in that area. It's a completely different style of filmmaking. Nic loves putting book titles in his films. It gives texture to the characters, if they're reading a book whose title you can see. I think that's one of Nic's great strengths as a director, that he picks out those things like nobody else. It's attention to detail, which is why he needs to shoot in a different style to Oshima.

There's been no real conscious yardstick by which I've chosen projects or directors. It comes down to personal taste, and what you want to spend your time on. Exotic is the word I would use, I think the films are very exotic. I don't think there's any political link between them. It's just style I think which attracts me. And as I have aspirations to direct myself, I've been working with filmmakers I wanted to get something from as well as to produce their films. It's a two-way street; I was looking and learning as well. I suppose I'm in awe of great directors, knowing how difficult it is to make a really fine picture.

Interview by Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1983

MERRY CHRISTMAS MR. LAWRENCE

Directed by: Nagisa Oshima
©: National Film Trustee Company Ltd.
Made in association with: Antares-Nova N.V.,
Recorded Picture Company, Oshima Productions,
Asahi National Broadcasting, Broadbank Investments Limited
Executive Producers: Masato Hara, Eiko Oshima,
Geoffrey Nethercott, Terry Glinwood
Producer: Jeremy Thomas
Producer's Assistant: Sevilla Delofski
Associate Producers: Joyce Herlihy, Larry Parr
Production Accountant: Tony Hedges
Assistant Accountants: Lynne Newport, Mitsue Fujita
Production Co-ordinator: Margaret Hilliard
Location Manager: Takashi Shirai
Production Assistant: Kuniko Usui
Production Secretary: Vivien Bridgewater
1st Assistant Director: Lee Tamahori
2nd Assistant Director: Jonty Barraud
3rd Assistant Director: Geoff Hill
Assistant to the Director: Roger Pulvers
Continuity: Raijin Nakahata
Japan Casting: Takashi Ueno
New Zealand Casting: Diana Rowan
Screenplay by: Nagisa Oshima
Screenplay with: Paul Mayersberg
Based on The Seed and the Sower by: Sir Laurens van der Post
Director of Photography: Tôichirô Narushima
Camera Operator: Hiroaki Sugimura
Focus Puller: Andy Roelants
Clapper/Loader: Rick Allender
Key Grip: Brian Harris
Grips: Dennis Cullen, Jeff O'Donnell
Gaffer: Warren Mearns
Best Boy: Don Jowsey
Stills Photography: Takashi Ueno
Special Effects: Akira Houma
Editor: Tomoyo Oshima
Assistant Editor: Kenichi Takashima
Negative Cutting: Kimie Kawagishi
Production Designer: Jusho Toda
Art Director: Andrew Sanders
Assistant Art Directors: Tetsuya Hataya, Kazumasa Normura
Set Dresser: Masaru Arakawa
Properties: Shoichi Yasuda
Properties Buyer: Lyn Bergquist
Stand-by Props: Chris Paulger
Construction Manager: Kyoichi Hashimoto
Construction Technicians: Ryoichi Kamon,
Masaaki Kobayashi, Yutaka Wakase
Wardrobe Supervisor: Christine West

Wardrobe Master: Kazuo Matsuda
Makeup Supervisor: Anthony Clavet
Makeup Chief: Robern Pickering
Hair: Glenis Daly
Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto
Brother's Song Composed by: Stephen McCurdy
Sound Recordist: Mike Westgate
Boom Operator: Eugene Arts
Sound Re-recording: Tetsuya Ohashi, Aoi Studio
Dolby Stereo Consultants: Mikio Mori, Continental Far East Inc
Sound Effects: Akira Honma
Dubbing Mixer: Akira Honma
Armourer: Ralph Gardiner

Cast

David Bowie (*Major Jack 'Straffer' Celliers*)
Tom Conti (*Colonel John Lawrence*)
Ryuichi Sakamoto (*Captain Yonoi*)
Takeshi (*Sergeant Gengo Hara*)
Jack Thompson (*Group Captain Hicksley*)
Johnny Okura (*Kanemoto*)
Alistair Browning (*De Jong*)
James Malcolm (*Celliers' brother*)
Chris Broun (*Jack Celliers, aged 12*)
Yuya Uchida (*commandant of military prison*)
Ryunosuke Kaneda (*Colonel Fujimura, President of the Court*)
Takeshi Naito (*Lieutenant Iwata*)
Tamio Ishikura (*prosecutor*)
Rokko Toura (*interpreter*)
Kan Mikami (*Lieutenant Ito*)
Yuji Honma (*PFC Yajima*)
Daisuke Iijima (*Corporal Ueki*)
Hideo Murota (*new commandant of the camp*)
Barry Dorking (*chief doctor*)
Geoff Clendon (*Australian doctor*)
Grant Bridger (*POW officer*)
Richard Adams, Geoff Allen, Michael Baxter-Lax, Marc Berg,
Marcus Campbell, Colin Francis, Richard Hensby, Richard Hoare,
Martin Ibbertson, Rob Jayne, Richard Mills, Mark Penrose, Arthur
Ranford, Steve Smith, Stephen Taylor, Richard Zimmerman (*POWs*)
Ian Miller (*English guard*)
Don Stevens (*pastor*)
Yoichi Iijima, Satoshi Ito, Masaki Kusakabe, Kunihide Kuruma, Hiroshi
Mikami, Akihiro Masuda, Tokuhisa Masuda, Takeshi Nagasawa, Takeshi
Odashima, Masanori Okada, Shoetsu Sato, Rintaro Shibata, Masamichi
Shibasaki, Kaname Shimura, Kenzo Shirahama, Hisao Takeda, Hidenobu
Togo, Atsuo Yamashita, Heiwa Yoshihara, Takeshi Yu (*Japanese soldiers*)

UK/Japan/New Zealand 1983
123 mins

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