



OUT OF ARABIA

Columbia brings forth a heroic mirage from the desert sands on DVD

by Nick Zegarac

Director, David Lean's most celebrated film **Lawrence of Arabia** (1962) is an enigma. For without the enormous concave expanses of Panavision being projected inside a darkened theater, the film's illusory aura is as fleeting as a mirage. The characters are starkly wrought stereotypes loosely based on history; the passionate peasant with a learned mind, Sherif Ali (Omar Sharif); the lustful sheik with a darker purpose, Auda (Anthony Quinn) and the emasculated intellectual, Prince Feisel (Alec Guinness) who is shamed by a people unwilling to see beyond the immediacy of tomorrow.

Peter O'Toole as T.E. Lawrence was inspired casting; for there is something that goes beyond into the realm of the haunted in the parallel physical shape and coloring of these two men. But the real star of this four hour epic is the desert. Lean holds his long shots on the screen until the sweep and grandeur of those magnificent sand caps and outcroppings of craggy rock work their hypnotic magic on an audience lulled into sweet paralysis. We emerge from the experience of '**Lawrence**', parched for deeper meaning as to the loss of this legendary, near mythological creature; an immortal on screen tragically too human to survive even a common wreck.





PLOT: The story is basically told as one giant flashback following Lawrence's accidental death on a motorcycle. T.E. Lawrence (O'Toole) is dissatisfied with his present map-making post in Cairo. A scholar and a poet, he yearns for deeper purpose. That purpose is provided to him when foreign affairs minister, Mr. Dryden (Claude Rains) suggests that Lawrence be

allowed to 'inspect' the Arab revolt being led against the Turks across the desert sands by Prince Feisel (Alec Guinness). However, upon meeting the prince and his darker confidant, Sherif Ali ibn el Kharish (Omar Sharif), Lawrence is convinced that the Arab revolt will have a chance against the Turks if they conspire to take the city of Agrabah away from them by launching a land assault - something that has never been attempted before. The mission accomplished, Lawrence surprises even his superiors, Colonel Brighton (Anthony Quayle) and Gen. Allenby (Jack Hawkins).

However, the British have no intention of surrendering their dessert provinces to the Arab revolt. They permit Lawrence to conquer the Turks in swells of well timed, perfectly orchestrated attacks. However, about midway through these campaigns glory gets the better of Lawrence.

Believing himself invincible Lawrence is caught by the Turks and raped under the command of the Bey (Jose Ferrer). Scarred from the experience, Lawrence delves into the deeper side of his psyche - waging a slaughter on the retreating Turk forces. By the time he and the Arab armies arrive in Cairo their revolt has turned inward. The varying factions of the army criticize one another and pillage each other's dreams for a united Arab front, thereby allowing the British their porthole of opportunity to step in and retake control of the city and the desert. Lawrence is relieved of his command and sent home to England to recuperate.



FACTOIDS OF ARABIA

- The real T.E. Lawrence wrote several books about his experiences in the desert including *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* – considered a seminal work in its day.
- David Lean had wanted Albert Finney as his Lawrence. Producer Sam Spiegel was responsible for urging Lean to consider Peter O'Toole instead.
- Omar Sharif was virtually unknown in America when Lean cast him as Ali. Egyptian born Sharif had been a modestly successful actor in his own country but only on television. He had no film experience. Incidentally, Sharif's real name is Michael Shalhoub. When asked his name by Lean, and thereafter told that it was Omar Sharif, the inquisitive director declared, "Nobody is named Omar Sharif. I'll just call you Fred."
- Lean considered Alec Guinness his good luck charm after 'The Bridge on the River Kwai.' He cast the actor in virtually all but one of his subsequent films. As Prince Feisel, Guinness give one of the most subtly credible performances in the film, rich and full of nuances that are decidedly more British than Arabic – but lending an air of authenticity nonetheless.
- Anthony Quinn, who plays Auda Abu Tayi wore a prosthetic nose more angular and pronounced than his own in the film.
- The film has no speaking roles for women.
- Although most of the film was shot in the actual deserts that Lawrence himself had visited, the climactic blowing up of a Turkish train and the assassination of its passengers was photographed in Spain.
- The heat was so intense on location that the film had to be stored in coolers to keep from melting.
- Shortly after its triumphant premiere, Columbia began toying with its length, cutting 'Lawrence' down to accommodate more daily showings. By 1969 the film's original 225 minutes had been butchered to the more manageable 180 minutes, then 165. Most of the excised footage was either thrown out or improperly stored inside Columbia's vaults and the film in its entirety remained unseen for nearly 30 years.
- In 1989 film restorer Robert A. Harris, together with David Lean, conducted an exhaustive search for the excised material. Though they managed to find all of the lost footage – certain portions of the soundtrack were discovered to have been destroyed in the intervening years. Lean, Harris and Columbia decided to go back to the well – enlisting surviving cast members, including Peter O'Toole, to re-dub their lines. Actor Charles Gray was called in to dub for the late Jack Hawkins.
- It took David Lean nearly 18 months to shoot Lawrence. It took Harris and Columbia roughly the same amount of time to restore it to its original brilliance.
- Jackson Bentley, the reporter who makes Lawrence famous in the film is actually based on journalist Lowell Thomas who first brought Lawrence's exploits in the desert to the public's attention.
- A contractual obligation forced Lean to credit Sir Adrian Boult with conducting Maurice Jarre's film score. In fact, Jarre himself was the conductor on the film – a credit restored to him with the release of the soundtrack album.



LAWRENCE ON DVD

Columbia Tri-Star has released *Lawrence of Arabia* no fewer than three times on DVD: the first time in a deluxe 2 disc Special Edition, the second – a barebones movie only release; the third, a 2 disc Superbit Edition. Before continuing it behooves this reviewer to illustrate that none of these editions satisfactorily represents *Lawrence* for the home viewing experience. The first two editions have basically been struck from the same print elements – slightly less saturated and contrasted than they should be, and with a barrage of digital anomalies (mostly edge enhancement and shimmering of fine details) that makes for a fairly dismal viewing experience. For the Superbit Edition, Robert A. Harris was recalled to supervise a new hi-definition master of the film. Though color saturation and balancing is greatly improved on this edition, the annoying digital anomalies persist, thereby continuing to distract from an otherwise improved image.

On the third edition then, colors are richer, more fully saturated. Black levels are deep and solid. Whites are, for the most part, clean and white. Contrast levels are dead on. The audio on all three versions of the film appears to be the same 5.1 audio mix. It exhibits a very smooth spread across all channels and, if dated, is at least a faithful recreation of the original audio presentation. The dubbed sequences exhibit a sonic characteristic that is more subtly nuanced and betrays its' re-recording. On the deluxe 2-disc edition the film is split across both discs at its point of intermission. However, on the Superbit edition the break comes awkwardly and inexplicably at least 30 minutes before the intermission.

EXTRAS: Unfortunately, the only way to get extras for *Lawrence* is to buy Columbia's initial 2-disc release with a poorer quality print of the actual film. Extras include a masterfully produced documentary on the making of the film, reflections from Steven Spielberg, vintage featurettes used to promote the film, theatrical trailers and a stills gallery. Sadly, the better print of the film must also be purchased to get the full '*Lawrence*' experience on DVD. Perhaps '*Lawrence*' will get revisited yet again on DVD in the future.