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Review

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underlord completes his annals, telling us, however, that to preserve the honor of his family he must omit the truth (what we have seen). The camera closes on the reconstructed warrior deity, more ghostly and hollower than before.

The film-economy here is suggestive of the Noh and it is a quite legitimate resource, to say nothing of being a stimulating one. The camerawork is apt, felt only when attention wants scoring. The editing is crisp and clear, tactful (i.e., neither arty by worrying a pretty picture into metaphysical sense nor slick with sudden splices and devices for shock effect). The music is also sparse, marking transitions, quiet moments, sustaining pitch, building drive, not melodic but accentual. There is the *biwa* (Japanese lute), sometimes subdued and whispering throatily and sometimes harshly jangling, and there is the *hari-ogi* (slapping fan used in Noh study) with its rhythmic snapping whack. The performances of Rentaro Mikuni as the underlord and Tatsuya Nakadai as the bearded ronin are excellent.

But the beauty of the film seems largely due to Kobayashi's underlying firmness of conception and prevailing spirit, by an unevanescent concern for cinematic values. He speaks for human responsibility (without calling attention to himself in the process) as the pervasive human dignity, and tells us again that the local, if we sound it, provides the universal with whatever meaning it may have.

—CID CORMAN

### BILLY LIAR

Director: John Schlesinger. Scenario: Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall, from the novel by Waterhouse. Photography: Denys Coop. Music: Richard Rodney Bennett. Continental.

Nine A.M. in a BBC studio. A suave middle-aged disc jockey puts a smile on his face and begins to introduce a housewives' request program. . . . *Is this going to be another dollop of British satire?* The camera takes a long look at a semidetached suburban house, and then

moves off past row after row of identical houses, apartment buildings, more identical houses. . . . *Is this going to be another hunk of British north-country "realism"?* Cut to Tom Courtenay, daydreaming in bed while sour-faced mam and dad yell at him from downstairs to bloody well get a move on. . . . *Is this going to be another apologia for an angry young man beset by uncomprehending barbarians?*

The answer to each of these questions turns out to be: yes and NO. The clichés of Room-at-the-Topery are there, but well salted with reality. We're allowed to feel somewhat more than accidental sympathy for mam and dad, and there are glimpses of family fondness amid the naggings and yellings. Billy's boss, an undertaker by the name of Shadrack, seems to invite satire in the monolithic style of the young psychiatrist in *Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*—and yet Schlesinger avoids much of the temptation, granting Shadrack a surprising leaven of human dignity.

The fact is, Billy himself is not at all the conventional angry young iconoclast. His discontent is neither divine nor demonic, but all too human. Unlike Courtenay's hard-shelled, tough-willed runner, the character he plays here has a sensitive shell and a pliant will. As a would-be writer, Billy can complete a song lyric but hardly begin a novel. As a would-be rebel against the routine of home and job, he continually falls back on that trusty but ineffectual weapon, fantasy.

Billy lies on impulse, to make life more interesting—giving himself a nonexistent sister or depriving his father of an existent leg, pretending to be blind or overdramatizing the difficulty of getting rid of 270 trade calendars he neglected to mail. Then he lies to protect the first lie—or to replace it when exposed. And whenever he can he retreats into a dream land called Ambrosia, of which he is the benevolent and beloved dictator.

In his previous—and first—feature, *A Kind*

of *Loving*, Schlesinger showed a talent for quiet but perspicuous realism. Unfortunately, the script was filled with realisms of the plodding kind, and the two realisms together bogged each other down. The script of *Billy Liar* offers a better foil for Schlesinger's talent: it sprawls all over the place, with a plot that ties itself in knots, and yet at heart (like Billy himself) it is quite serious. Schlesinger rises to the challenge. He treats the fantasy, the comedy and all the rest of the sprawl with gusto, but also with a strong sense of realism that binds them to the serious theme.

Realism is a word of many meanings. In Schlesinger's case, it is both livelier and more solid than in most so-called realistic films. Take the use of real locations. In many films (*A Taste of Honey* was one of the worst offenders) the locations are treated picturesquely: too artfully framed, torn from their own context and forced into the alien context of the screen play. But *Billy Liar's* city has a life of its own that continues off screen, and the lives of Billy and his friends weave easily in and out of it.

Billy strolls past a football stadium. Some of the spectators are visible in the background, cheering an unseen game. The next moment Billy is inside the stadium as dictator of Ambrosia, and the crowd is now cheering him. Here Schlesinger uses external reality as a springboard for Billy's fantasy—but that is just one part of his range. Late at night, Billy sits in a hospital waiting room: his grandmother is dying. Billy has planned to leave for London by a midnight train, but he is not sure whether he really wants or is able to go. Schlesinger holds his wide-screen camera still on this moment of stillness, while his microphone concentrates on a web of tiny sounds—whisperings, coughs, creakings, footfalls. Here the quiet, controlled realism invokes the reality that Billy has to face—the one big decision that he can neither lie nor daydream his way out of.

With his command of different modes and moods of realism, Schlesinger can give the film an immediacy and conviction that its

script sometimes lacks. The most crucial example is the character of Liz, the one person to whom Billy can tell the truth. Waterhouse and Hall have crammed so much incident into their script that apparently they had no room left to show how Liz and Billy became friends or why this down-to-earth, free-as-air, delicious girl should be so fond of him. Perhaps no demonstration was possible, for Liz is a bit too much of a dreamgirl, a *dea ex machina* who is not only the antithesis of Billy but also the agent of his climactic decision.

If Liz is a dramatic device, she certainly doesn't look it. Julie Christie, who plays the role, has tremendous natural presence, and Schlesinger lets that presence come across as fully and freely as possible. He introduces her in an extended sequence in which she walks and skips through the city, followed by a zooming and panning camera. The sequence has practically no dramatic significance at all. Who is the bearded man in the store whom Liz stops to greet through the window? We don't know and we don't care. He is just an excuse for Schlesinger to give us a closer view of Liz, to rivet our attention on her gangling gracefulness as we strain—like the bearded man—to hear her barely audible voice through the plate glass. This vivid introductory sequence gives Liz enough momentum of reality to carry her through the more mechanical aspects of the role.

If Schlesinger is stimulated to brilliance by weak spots in the script, he responds quite differently—but with equal aptness—to the strong points. The most impressive of these is the whole of the ending, from the hospital sequence onward. By contrast with most of the film, these last ten minutes or so are pitched in a quiet key—much of it the quietness of suspense. Billy arrives at the railroad station early and goes into the cafeteria. Here as in the hospital, there is a finely orchestrated web of background noises, but they are sharper—the rapidly muttered advice of a mother to her departing soldier son, the steaming and clanking of distant trains. There are brief outbursts of louder sounds—an encounter with

one of Billy's ex-girlfriends, a passing group of boisterous travelers—which emphasize the midnight deadness that returns afterward. And as Billy's moment of decision arrives, Schlesinger makes almost nerve-racking use of the clunk of coins inserted into a milk-dispensing machine. Since it would be unfair to reveal what Billy finally decides, I'll only say that his last fantasy—simple, quiet and brief—has the force of a knockout blow.

I nearly began this review by saying that half of *Billy Liar* is a failure. This may be true, but it's certainly misleading. Where the film misfires, it does so from attempting too much — attempting, above all, to sustain a rich mixture of comedy, pathos, gaiety, bitterness, bravado and all the other ingredients that can make up an imaginative young man's world. The ingredients are out of balance, but Schlesinger prepares them with such skill that the dish turns out, even so, to be both tasty and nourishing. If Schlesinger gets as challenging a script for his next film, I'm sure he'll make this praise of *Billy Liar* seem like overpraise. He is one British director who can be both profound and exciting.

—WILLIAM JOHNSON

### LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

Director: David Lean. Producer: Sam Spiegel. Photography: F. A. Young. Screenplay by Robert Bolt, based on "Seven Pillars of Wisdom," by T. E. Lawrence. Music: Maurice Jarre.

Millions of printed words about "Lawrence of Arabia" have gone by since his death in 1935, and all of them have tended to blur what faint line of demarcation there ever was between fact and fancy in the life of the twentieth century's most uneasy adventurer. Film's contribution to the enigma—physically and visually an outstanding motion picture—is also the newest source of folk-history about Lawrence. History tends to blend with popular or literary treatments of it, and with Lawrence there has been no exception: in fact he speeded the process along in his own lifetime, helping (or goading) writers into creating ele-

ments of his own myth, as well as doing part of the job himself. Sometimes this was done by emphasizing one side of him: the quiet archeologist from Oxford; the white-garbed, jeweled-daggered knight on a camel of Lowell Thomas's book; the military genius of Liddell Hart's biography; the shy, ubiquitous ex-colonel Private Meek of Bernard Shaw's play *Too True To Be Good*; the tortured, introspective leader of men of his own *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*; the ascetic, masochistic recruit of his service chronicle, *The Mint*.

T. E. Lawrence permitted no film about him during his lifetime, telling Sir Alexander Korda—who had placed G.B.S.'s "Private Meek" (Walter Hudd) under option for the purpose—to wait until he was dead. Only a year later he hurtled to his death in a motorcycle accident (seen now beneath the opening credits of the cinematic "Lawrence"), but Korda made no film. Nevertheless, the legend kept growing as new Lawrences kept emerging—the pathological liar and exhibitionist of Richard Aldington's "biographical enquiry" of 1954, the archetype of the horror-haunted twentieth-century intellectual in the 1955 biography by the French historian Jean Béraud Villars, and the physically and spiritually broken recluse of Terence Rattigan's 1960 play *Ross*.

T. E., characteristically deprecating his desert adventures, once told his brother Arnold that the most appropriate film medium for *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* would be a Disney cartoon. This might actually have been true in the 'thirties, and a decade ago his adventures might have been transformed in a Middle Eastern "Western." We now live in the age of the film spectacular, however, and one critic has ventured to call the film the first spectacular for adults. Whatever the virtues of the film's stunning desert photography, its Lawrence bears much the same relation to Col. Thomas Edward Lawrence that Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra does to that famous lady, whose record and reputation have been subjected to nearly a hundred times as many years of enrichment and improvement by the