

Movie majesty

'Last Emperor' is compelling, outstanding drama

With 19,000 extras employed, "The Last Emperor" is an epic by any standards, and director Bernardo Bertolucci ensures that it is as full of color, imagery and sheer spectacle as it is people.

The costumes are supremely elegant, the unprecedented location work at Beijing's Forbidden City stunning, the world of 20th-century China so completely created to the last detail; yet for all the visual splendor that parades across the screen, Bertolucci's film is unbelievably quiet and sad. Make no mistake — this is not a "feel-good movie." It is, however, one of the finest films of the decade.

"The Last Emperor" is the extraordinary true story of Pu Yi, who in 1908, at the age of 3, was crowned 10th of Ten Thousand Years and ruler of almost half of the world's population. He was abdicated three years later upon the formation of the first republic, but was forced to stay within the palatial but prison-like confines of the Forbidden City, where he grew up without power.

This was the first in a long series of prisons for the little emperor. Finally ousted from the city in 1924, he befriended the Japanese, who, he believed, might have been his last hope in retaining the power he lost as a child. It is ironic that the only choice he was ever allowed to make was the greatest mistake of his life, or the Japanese — a wily, imperialistic lot — made him Emperor of Manchukuo, solely to further their own master plan of Asian domination.

At the close of World War II, Pu Yi was imprisoned once again, this time as a war criminal in Communist China. At the Fushun Prison he was re-educated so that he could eventually be granted freedom in 1960. Free at last, Pu Yi, once emperor of China, retired to the humble life of a gardener.

It is a fascinating story, heavy in irony, but Bertolucci does not emphasize the drama of it, and he is right not to. Despite the immense historical background the film covers (the end of the Qing dynasty, the Kuomintang and Chiang Kai-Shek, World War II, the establishment of the People's Republic through to the Cultural Revolution of the '60s), "The Last Emperor" remains the intimate story of a man who was a victim of history, who was buffeted around, puppet-like, by the events of a century that no longer had a place for

Richard Smith
Cinema

emperors and dynasties.

Bertolucci keeps the scale of things in control by basing the story in 1950, when Pu Yi was imprisoned by the Communists who not so much pushed as shoved him down the road of self-analysis. Interrogations and prison life trigger lengthy flashbacks, and this is the means by which the viewer discovers how Pu Yi came to be in a reform center and how he began the slow metamorphosis from prisoner to free citizen. In this sense, it is a sad story, beautifully told.

And it is not insignificant that the cinematography is as majestic as it is; Pu Yi, despite his ambitions, was someone who could do little more than watch his life go by, as if he were himself watching this marvelous spectacle of a movie. It is an idea that Bertolucci does not pass up, as Pu Yi and his inmates are seen to watch newsreels relating events that encompass and feature much of the last emperor's life.

Vittorio Storaro, who has worked with Bertolucci on all but one of his films and has already won two Academy Awards for his photography in "Reds" and "Apocalypse Now," creates a visual feast that alone makes "The Last Emperor" worthy of praise. It is a light, unobtrusive touch — the stark gray of the Fushun prison, the brash reds and yellows of the emperor's early years, the more subtle shades of blue and green as his grip on his own destiny loosens. It is a ploy naturally echoed by James Acheson's costumes.

But "The Last Emperor" is not merely a technical wonder — its polish is as much a credit to its stars as it is to its makers. Three actors play the younger Pu Yi at ages 3, 8 and 15 (each of whom offers a different accent, not to say a slightly different interpretation — a small but nevertheless annoying point), but John Lone has the awesome task of portraying the anti-hero from the age of 18 through to his death at age 62.

Lone has just the sort of timeless face that makes the task viable, and the skill that renders it a triumph. Though entirely convincing as the younger, ambitious Pu Yi, he is best at the Fushun prison as the Pu Yi alternately clinging to, hiding from

and finally coming to terms with his life. It is an exemplary performance.

Peter O'Toole's role as the acerbic, refined Briton, Reginald Johnston (R.J.), might be problematic were it not for O'Toole's affinity for playing acerbic, refined Britons. R.J. is Pu Yi's English-Scots tutor and mentor whose influence on the young man is obvious yet curiously undefined. This is partly based on truth, because it was rumored, though never proven, that R.J. was a spy planted by the British. Even so, O'Toole's characterization is superbly sour and their friendship — strong, but largely unexpressed — provides for some of the film's highlights.

"The Last Emperor" has already

won four Golden Globe awards, including one for Best Picture (drama), and doubtless it should figure highly in the upcoming Academy Award nominations.

It seems impossible, in retrospect, that Bertolucci could have achieved so much from such an immense subject; there is, after all, nothing so immense as somebody's life. Yet he has captured the essence of it, and in doing so has created a wonderful picture that says so much more than a mere historical narrative. It speaks of the majesty, the tragedy and the irony of one man's life; of the self-discovery that comes through failure; and of the strange, strange world in which we live.



John Lone in "The Last Emperor"

Forum

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things are already decided and issues are beyond our control."

Poston said it is important to have respect for Chapel Hill residents and to promote a positive image of the University.

One way of promoting a more positive image would be through a program sending UNC students to work with students in secondary schools in the community.

"Let's make a positive image, and then we'll talk about getting someone elected to town council," Poston said.

Maynard said the most important objective should be to have a student elected to the town council. This could happen through getting students to register and to vote, he said.

"I think we should take the initiative and get a student elected," Maynard said. "We've got 22,000 students, which is 22,000 votes."

Maynard also said he would establish a four-member town council advisory committee that would report back to the president after every council meeting.

Martin said many strides have already been made in improving relations with the town, and the liaison position will help to continue the improvement.

Problems like the noise ordinance came up because students did not know what was going on, Martin said.

The liaison will help Student Government to understand town issues better, he said.

"We have to make sure Student Government is involved in all the decision-making that's going on," Martin said.

Lewis said the liaison is a positive step but will only be effective if there is communication between Student Government and the liaison.

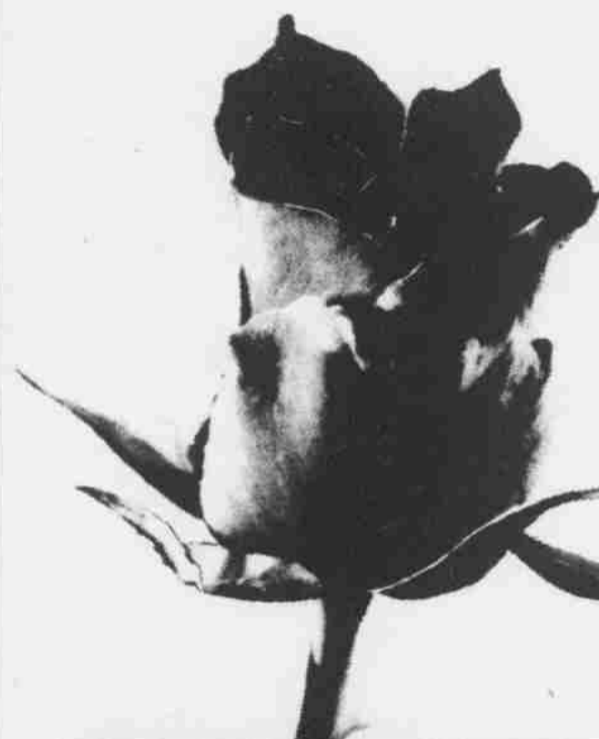
"The big problem simply is not knowing what the other people are up to," Lewis said. "We're just not out there with our ears to the ground."

Beasley said the problem with relations is that students only become concerned with the town when it makes decisions that directly involve them.

The University, the town and the students should work together on mutually beneficial projects in the community, Beasley said.

"We've got to work together and be with them every other 360 days of the year, not just when we've got a problem," Beasley said.

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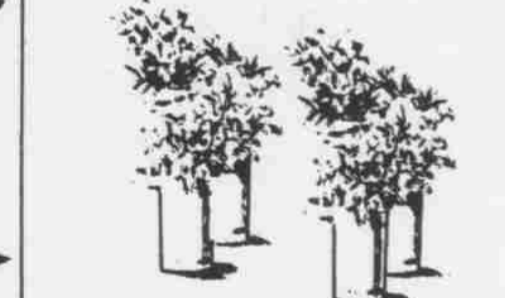


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