Period Piece

reviewed by John Petrakis in the September 25, 2002 issue

Cowardice in the movies is one of those all-too-human flaws that tends to get under an audience's skin as they sit in the dark and wonder what they might do under similar circumstances. Would I go over the top onto a bloody battlefield or stay frozen in my foxhole? Step out into a dusty western street to face the bad guys or cower in a doorway as someone else does the job? Tell the Roman soldiers that yes, I am indeed one of them, or skulk in the shadows as the cock crows?

A. E. W. Mason's 1902 novel *The Four Feathers* is an adventure story that addresses, at least in part, the personal agony of cowardice. It has been an extremely popular book with filmmakers, dating back to the silent era, who clearly relish its heady mix of ethics and action. The 1939 movie version, directed by Zoltan Korda with music by the great Miklos Rozsa, is often cited as one of the great battle films of that era. Now it has been remade yet again, directed by Shekhar Kapur (*Elizabeth*), whose Indian heritage makes for a most interesting take on this "sun never sets on the British empire" epic.

The Four Feathers plays out in the late 1800s, when Britannia indeed ruled the world, and concerns a young English army lieutenant named Harry Feversham (Heath Ledger). Harry comes from a long line of fighting Fevershams, who have battled and died for the Union Jack at various outposts. But once it is Harry's turn to grab a rifle and go fight in the Sudan, he immediately resigns his commission and leaves the military. This unheard-of act is so loathsome to his superiors, his father, his comrades-in-arms and even his fiancée that in short order he is in possession of the feathers (one from each of his bunkmates, and one from the love of his life) which signify blatant cowardice. Harry eventually heads off to the Sudan, pretending to be an Arab, to help his friends and former regiment fight the good fight against the "heathens."

The film is rousing in places, with plenty of sophisticated battle sequences, but it is marred by a number of bad writing and editing decisions. Mason's book and the 1939 film both contain a scene in which Harry as a young boy hears his father

recalling his brave military exploits in the Crimea. At the same time, he is also forced to listen to tales of cowardice, and how those "slackers" were either slaughtered on the field of battle or committed suicide years later, unable to live with the shame. (The scene is especially memorable in Korda's movie, where the father is played by the blustery actor C. Aubrey Smith, who personified the arrogance of the British empire.) Harry is so moved and terrified by these tales of cowardly justice that he carries them with him into manhood.

Inexplicably, the new version excludes this scene, which means that the first sign we have of Harry's questioning and indecision (in the novel, he is compared to Hamlet) comes after he has received his marching orders. With no set-up, we are left with the clammy feeling that the only reason the talented, confident and revered Harry refuses to fight is because the script says he must--which is the mark of bad writing.

The film also falters near the end, after Harry has allowed himself to be captured and imprisoned by the enemy so he can save one of his feather-giving friends. These scenes are so choppy and confusing, it feels like they are being directed from a "Cliff Notes" version of the novel, instead of a screenplay that is supposed to be "epic" in its dimensions.

The best part of the movie, interestingly enough, is the second act, where Harry is befriended by an African slave named Abou Fatma (Djimon Hounsou from *Amistad*), who finds the white man passed out and near death in the desert. This section helps us to understand, through a series of fireside chats, what Harry was contemplating when he left the service, while also addressing the issue that is present, almost unspoken, throughout the film: England's twisted belief that it had the God-given right to conquer. ("You English walk too proudly on this Earth," Abou Fatma observes.)

The young cast is capable, though certainly not exceptional. Ledger has bravado and physical presence to burn (at times he resembles a young Richard Harris), but lacks the meditative qualities to suggest a man who is wrestling with self-doubt. As his best friend and rival in love and war, Wes Bentley (*American Beauty*) seems too raw and slight, even as he does his best David Niven impersonation. But they both positively shine in comparison to Kate Hudson (*Almost Famous*), whose contemporary style of acting and reacting are all wrong for the difficult role of the proud and anguished fiancée.

The Four Feathers is an intriguing story to revisit just now, as the world's latest Western superpower considers war in the Middle East. At one point in the film, English soldiers capture an Arab sniper and order him to lay down his rifle. The sniper is about to comply when he notices he is being watched by a group of young men from the village. Instead of surrendering, he starts to reload his gun, and is immediately shot, which leads to the British soldiers being stoned.

If *The Four Feathers* had pursued issues like these instead of falling back on a lot of charging and firing of guns, it might be a more relevant morality play for the 21st century. As it is, the film seems like a dusty period piece that has been dragged out one too many times.