

The Man Who Would Be King

Huston never pauses to moralize

John Huston has been in critical disrepute for over two decades. During that time, the standard approach to reviewing a new Huston film was to trot out the same old opening line and work from there: "It is a sad, nay, a painful specta-

By DAVID COURSEN

cle to contemplate the decline of the once-great director of (fill in name of early Huston film, usually *The African Queen*), now reduced to degrading himself by turning out tripe such as (fill in name of film being reviewed).

Two crackerjack local reviewers have in part echoed this sentiment, citing Huston's dismal record of recent films, including, in both cases, his direction of "Man in the Wilderness." Now that may or may not be a bad film, and it does co-star John Huston (so does "Chinatown"), but the man had nothing whatsoever to do with directing it. It is, however, characteristic that the party line on Huston should be echoed by "critics," who, literally, can't tell an actor from a director.

As you might have guessed, I have as little sympathy for this narrow, jaundiced view of Huston as for the paint-by-the-numbers movie reviewing it has sometimes fostered. Indeed, I count myself among Huston's admirers, although he has, undeniably, been involved in some thoroughly dubious ventures.

"The Man Who Would Be King," a project he had once hoped to film with Gable and Bogart in the starring roles, is one of the most extraordinary films of his career. Among its virtues are impeccable acting, near-perfect editing, and a script that is marvelously rich and multi-leveled, but never gives even a hint of pretentiousness. Moreover, it is a film that is utterly personal to its director (perhaps one of the most personal epics ever made), and full of visual and thematic strands that resonate with those in countless other Huston films.

The best place to start a discussion of the film is with the director himself. Huston's approach to film making has not found favor with dogmatic auteurs, since his avowed intention has always been to let his material speak for itself, rather than to transform it into something that is obviously "like" other Huston films. This spirit of

had always seemed to lack. But it is Michael Caine, in the performance of his career, who is the marvel of the film. His role is full of risks; every speech or gesture carries with it the possibility of either doing the character properly or making the film seem ridiculous. Particularly characteristic is his cheerful way of mis-

pronouncing names and, best of all, his brassy treatment of a colonial official who is ordering him out of the country. That incident is so deliciously ludicrous that, if Caine were less than flawless, if he made a single mistake of emphasis, the whole sequence would play as simple self-parody.

Indeed, Huston might have played the whole film for laughs. The story itself is, in 1975-6 so quaintly dated that it seems impossible to treat it with tongue anywhere but in cheek. But since the comic element is there already, effortlessly and inevitably, the real challenge is to work with it. The material has overtones that demand irony and detachment, but the film itself also compels our involvement; the two effects are complementary. For example, we cannot fail to notice the touching

foolishness of Sean Connery's solemnly funny death, but neither can we help being peculiarly moved by it. This emotional ambivalence continually enriches the film. Huston has taken a piece of our cinematic and cultural past and placed it in the present with complete respect for both its traditional and contemporary contexts.

Perhaps the whole of the film is best characterized by its treatment of imperialism. The desire for plunder coexists with the arrogant but well-intentioned desire to "civilize the savages." But the grand and grandiose hubris of the venture itself contains the seeds of its own destruction. And this is all conveyed within the story itself; Huston has crafted the film so efficiently that he never has to pause to moralize, to make a point, or to tell us what to think.*



Scene from 'The Man Who Would Be King'

openness extends also to his method of working with his actors, aiming, not for a John Huston performance, but rather for the best possible performance. This has led some people, mistakenly, to comment on Huston's good luck in directing so many well-cast films, a remarkably obtuse and hostile way of conceding his skill as a director of actors. (Curiously, the actor who often fares worst under Huston's direction is Huston himself.)

In any case, "The Man Who Would Be King" has two of the most splendid performances of recent years. Sean Connery displays a gift for understatement he

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