

More Like the Book?

to play the lead in the picture and that he wanted me to come to Tahiti, where he was doing another movie at the time. I assumed it was to talk about the filming of *The Ugly American*. But in two weeks, we explicitly discussed the book for only five minutes.

Some sort of an eerie exchange was going on, however. At dinner we might start off by talking about a progressive school in England. Gradually we might slide into the differences between American and English character, and then things would get to a hard point: do English diplomats perform better than Americans?

The arguments often got heated, but they always were over by midnight. Despite stories I have read, Brando never drank after dinner and was almost morbidly sensitive to his "call" the next morning.

I USUALLY WALKED out into the mild Tahitian night with the sensation of being "had." Brando slides into one's mind, pulls out a bit of knowledge, clutches it, and runs. He does it with a gentle skill which must be inherited; no man could live long enough to learn it.

He struck me as a man picking up fragments with the hope of putting them into something recognizable. An example: once he asked me about *latah*, a curious hysterical state which is easily induced in Malays. As I finished, I looked up and he was *latah*: eyes glazed, mouth slightly open, breathing very rapid, movements jerky and mechanical. He winked, recomposed his face. It was only a rehearsal, but it was terrifyingly like the real thing.

Back on the mainland, I saw Englund and Stern at work. By now they had crept inside the characters whom Lederer and I had invented—characters I knew only as deeply as ink prints on paper. They argued ferociously and actually seemed to be living the characters.

Part of their work was pure, hilarious fantasy. Sarkhan, the country in which the book's action takes place, is wholly fiction. But they had invented a Sarkhanese dialect, designed a flag for the country, and drew up a map of Southeast Asia on which they had hacked out a place for their new nation. They even took sides in domestic Sarkhanese politics.

Occasionally I would comment. They didn't hear; they were off in a visionary world, living it completely. And they worked much harder than had Lederer and I.

THREE YEARS, seven months, and 15 days after we closed the deal, Lederer and I saw the movie in Hollywood. The screen came alive with a hot shimmering scene of Asia. For several moments, I sat with stomach muscles as tense as a washboard. Then for two hours and three minutes, I watched the film unfold. It has only the most passing resemblance to a novel called *The Ugly American*. Some names were the same, a few situations seemed familiar. But it was like trying to remember a dream. We had given the characters names; now they walked and talked, but they were strangers.

Five minutes later I had forgotten that the picture was partly mine and also that Brando was a friend. I remembered only the tiny snips and bits he had picked up—for now they came back at me from the screen.

I think the picture is better than the book; more integrated, more skillful, and more dramatic. It is a hard thing to acknowledge. It is even harder to concede that, in between the brilliant colors and the savage acting, the political impact is still there. It is slipped into speeches, implied by the ferocious howling of a mob moving in to kill Brando. But it is there.

When the screening was over, we walked out into the empty alleys of the Universal lot. "When do we eat?" Lederer asked. Then, turning to Englund, he added: "A good flick. Where did you get the idea for it?" We all laughed. Not an easy laugh, but an understanding one.

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