

## Expecting Greatness.txt

### Expecting Greatness - Gary W. Tooze

On what is known as 'Boxing Day' in Britain (the day following Christmas) in 1946 director David Lean's "Great Expectations" premiered on the silver screen in London. Utilizing one of the great stories of western culture, with visual storytelling and incorporating atmospheric detail, Lean successfully and faithfully adapted Charles Dickens masterpiece novel into what is now regarded as classic cinema for both film and literary fans alike. It received acclimation for its art direction and cinematography.

52 years later an extremely gifted young Mexican director named Alfonso Cuarón took the task of contemporizing the Great Expectations novel-to-film. The beloved story is that of a humble orphan who suddenly becomes a celebrated gentleman with the help of an unrecognized benefactor. He adapted the story into a modern film with modern motifs and values. It would be outside the realm of expectations to suspect that this would receive anything but failed reviews from critics comparing it to the highly regarded Lean classic of half a century before. I can't understand why a positive response for this updated version could somehow tarnish the status of the 46' film. The result is an unjust mistreatment of a marvelous and rewarding film. Cuarón's next project, Y tu mamá también, would belatedly catapult him to the recognizable status that he so richly deserved with his version of Great Expectations in 1998.

With mediocre reviews stemming from unfair comparisons the recent Great Expectations film has been unseen by many film fans who tend to faithfully follow some the most conservative critics views. These film journalists dare not praise the modern film because by doing so they may potentially risk tarnishing the untouchable masterpiece of 46' - and thereby incurring the wrath of cinema historians and film scholars. In direct comparison though Cuarón's version seems to shine quite brightly against the somewhat stilted production and performances of yesteryear. Dare I say - it is a superior film in almost every sense.

Mitch Glazer's unique screenplay adaptation of the Dickens novel is both creative and pays worthy homage to the original story not deviating from its basic themes and principles. 'Pip' from the book has become "Finn", a shortened form of Finnegan. His patriarch's blue-collar occupation moves from a blacksmith to a fisherman/handyman and the location from the English moors to the gulf coast of Florida. His social status elevation is not simply an educated gentleman but one of a successful artist - and his benefactor is once again an escaped convict burying inside him a deep code of honor. In the 98' film it is played with successful mystery, stealth and seething aggressive power by Robert De Niro, whose screen presence is always consistently strong. In this more modern adaptation the love interest of Estella is dealt in more of a romantic vein. A lithe Gwyneth Paltrow adeptly enhances the role of the the ice princess devoid of true emotional attachments. This performance literally glows against the miscast portrayal by Valerie Hobson in Lean's film. Cuarón's masterful framed shots and vistas meld gently with the softly plucked guitar strings in the soundtrack. The floating camera helps create a poetic atmosphere as we witness the maturation of a young man.

More on the performances - a young Alec Guinness (Herbert Pocket) in his first credited role is adept in Lean's version with no corresponding character in Cuaróns, but the most

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extravagant difference is in the Miss Havisham character from Dickens text. As a device the character is the misconstrued benefactor and mentor to Estella's muted passions. Anne Bancroft transforms this into the flamboyant and eccentric Ms. Nora Dinsmoor who lives in a dilapidated old southern mansion called Paradiso Perduto ('Satis House' in the original). It is covered with creeping vines and overgrown foliage as her classroom for young Estella. Miss Havisham, played by Martita Hunt in Lean's black and white expose is almost asleep in comparison. Ms. Dinsmoor dances around with caked on makeup and a cigarette holder exemplifying her wealthy-bag-lady expression. Bancroft is wonderful and borders on stealing each scene that Ms. Dinsmoor appears.

We can now ask - Is the original story perhaps out of touch with a modern audience? Certainly the attempt at updating should not be met with the huge indifference. The basic plotline of the story is read by almost every high school student and has become a well-worn classic, if only from the stance of its prolific nature. Could the youths of today relate more closely to Cuarón's contemporary narrative? I would suspect the answer is quite positively 'yes'. Some of the obvious interrelated differences are social values, pre-marital sex and single parenthood which are all unusually common today in western culture. Expecting youths of today to fully appreciate the courting rituals of the such a distant past is unrealistic.

Cuarón does more than just adeptly update the story - he floats his camera around the film like director Anh Hung Tran in "The Scent of Green Papaya". Observant fans will notice the great

difficulty and preparation and how he tackles the painstaking choreography. His story is told with the grace of a ballerina and the occasional interjecting of narration by "Finn" as we are seeing the story through his eyes. It is a shame that the work ethic, diligence and creativity of this film are so unrewarded and unnoticed.

To quote Robin Wood (from his Cineaction magazine - issue 55) with an excerpt from his article on Ethan Hawke:

"Anyone wanting a precise comparison with Lean might look at the two treatments of the pivotal scene in which Joe visits the newly affluent Pip in the city, to Pip's embarrassment and Joe's humiliation. In Lean the sequence is staged and shot with no more distinction than an average TV sitcom; in Cuaron it becomes a masterfully orchestrated piece of pure cinema, perfectly judged in tone, superbly choreographed. Lean is 'faithful' to Dickens text, Cuaron's is intelligently rethought in contemporary terms, and extensively developed..."

I agree with Robin completely, and this certainly does not diminish the original nor the admiration and respect I have for David Lean. Cuaron's filmmaking was well thought out and yet still acknowledging the original... standing on Lean's shoulders if you will... producing a more in-depth and focused view of the same incident.

Roger Ebert states in his review:

"...Great Expectations" doesn't finish at the same high level that it begins (if it did, it would be one of the year's best films)..."

Perhaps we have come to a more definitive criticism of this hidden gem of a

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film. Not that I agree. Personally I didn't find any failing of the ending at all, but suspect that its divergence from the Lean version is sadly unacceptable to some, especially those trying to seek fault at any level. With the chance meeting of Finn and Estella (and her daughter who we suspect comes from a broken marriage) it seems once again to put a more modern branch on the story... and as with the original, your imagination is left to conclude their fate. To me this is the perfect formulation of an ending. It is less judgmental or cloying and often about as realistic as life can get. To contain something definitive would have been too expected and typical of "Hollywood" in my mind.

Cuarón's film is filled with rich beautiful images, modern circumstance, rewarding performances and a gentle and profound musical score. Taking the unpopular stance is not uncommon for this reviewer and I find it an infinitely better and more enjoyable film than Lean's stayed original which strengths I found mostly in the time-honored story of Dickens not in its adaptation to the screen.