

THE FILMS OF DAVID O. RUSSELL

January 9–February 6, 2011

THREE KINGS

Saturday, February 5, 6:00pm

1999, 114 mins.

Written and directed by David O. Russell. Story by John Ridley. Photographed by Newton Thomas Sigel.

Production Design by Catherine Hardwicke. Edited by Robert K. Lambert. Costume Design by Kym Barrett.

Original Music by Carter Burwell.

Principal Cast: George Clooney (as Archie Gates), Mark Wahlberg (Troy Barlow), Ice Cube (Chief Elgin), Spike Jonze (Conard Vig), Nora Dunn (Adriana Cruz), Jamie Kennedy (Walter), Mykelti Williamson (Colonel Horn), Cliff Curtis (Amir), Said Taghmaoui (Captain Sa'id).

Review by David Edelstein, *The New York Times*, April 6, 2003:

The Iraqi flourishing a white rag and a gun at the United States Army sergeant is far away, a speck on top of a mound in the middle of a flat, sun-bleached desert. Is he about to lay down his weapon or to fire it? The sergeant calls to his buddies: "Are we shooting people, or what?" In the absence of a firm answer -- one soldier is busy removing a grain of sand from another's eye, one dumbly repeats the question -- the sergeant takes no chances. He shoots the distant Iraqi in the neck.

This is not a moment from a recent, potentially spurious Iraqi surrender, but the overture to David O. Russell's 1999 movie "Three Kings," which begins in March 1991, just after the first gulf war has officially ended.

It might be the most stunning prelude to any war movie, ever: not as relentless as the carnage that opens "Saving Private Ryan" (1998) or as indelibly druggy as the curtain of napalm at the start of "Apocalypse Now" (1979), but morally dizzying in ways that few films come near. A tragic farce in

miniature, the sequence begins absurdly, then builds to a bitterly conclusive punch line: a gush of black blood and the bewildered throes of a dying man; a look of revulsion on the face of his killer.

It's rare that I turn to a Hollywood movie for a reality check. But the above scene from "Three Kings" -- shot four years ago on a dry Mexican lake bed -- captures a war unseen on American TV screens: the horror that emerges in newspaper accounts of suicide attacks on coalition soldiers and of frightened Americans unwittingly blowing up women and children.

"Three Kings" is about a new way of seeing war. A \$50 million studio film with major stars, it's a combination heist comedy, conversion melodrama and combat thriller; but the genre conventions are merely a springboard for Mr. Russell's true subject.

Again and again, he uses color, sound and surreal interpolations to break through the viewer's movie-fed, CNN-filtered, rock-'n'-roll-fueled dissociation. With its jarring mixture of tones, "Three Kings" was not a box-office blockbuster. But it looks more and more like a classic.

In an e-mail exchange last week from his office in Los Angeles, Mr. Russell said that he had wanted "Three Kings" to overturn Americans' self-satisfaction at having won a "moral victory" in Desert Storm. While writing the movie, he met with Gulf War veterans who told him how sickened they felt as, forbidden to intervene, they watched Iraqi insurgents, encouraged to rise up by the first President Bush, being slaughtered by Saddam Hussein's men.

The heist premise of "Three Kings" is the perfect back-door entry into its moral universe. After the movie's stark overture, a group of Army reservists is seen partying like frat boys, having seen combat only on CNN. When a map of Saddam's hidden bunkers, reportedly filled with stolen Kuwaiti gold bullion, is discovered in the rear end of a captured Iraqi soldier, cynical Special Forces Capt. Archie Gates (George Clooney) hatches a plan. He'll barrel into a nearby village with three reservists (Mark Wahlberg, Ice Cube and Spike Jonze), threatening them with the might of the United States military, and carry away the mother lode without firing a shot.

What Gates doesn't reckon on is the response of Iraqi civilians, who welcome his men as saviors, then turn to them for aid when Saddam's elite guard arrives. In the confusion, a truck entering the village is riddled with bullets and blown up; it turns out to be carrying milk for the starving civilians. Then the wife of a rebel prisoner is coldly executed before her young daughter's stricken eyes.

Gates's decision to engage Saddam's officers -- and the wordless exchange, reminiscent of "The Wild Bunch" (1969), between him and his men -- could have been structured to bring down the house with laughter. But Mr. Russell slows the gunfight, using shock cuts and slingshot angles to insure that no one in the audience pumps a fist and cries, "Yes!" The rabble remains unroused.

There are no glorified gunshots in "Three Kings": Mr. Russell has said that he wanted every bullet to matter. In the film's most notorious scene, Gates explains to his trigger-happy men what happens when a person is shot; and Mr. Russell demonstrates with a surreal close-up of a bullet plowing through soft tissue, the cavity filling with lime-green bile.

While promoting "Three Kings," the sometimes prickly Mr. Russell became irritated with a magazine reporter who persisted in marveling at the studio's decision to bankroll so uncommercial a project, and announced that he'd fired a bullet into an actual cadaver. His prank was published as fact and is still, to Mr. Russell's chagrin, widely accepted. But the myth gives the scene an extra kick of perversity -- which it needs, the concept having been appropriated by the TV drama "C.S.I." and turned into the ultimate symbol of our peculiar fetish for forensics.

Less easy to fetishize is the most abrasive sequence of "Three Kings," in which Sgt. Troy Barlow (Mr. Wahlberg) is tortured by an Iraqi officer, who demonstrates for the naïve American what the Iraqi says is the war's real aim -- protecting oil reserves -- by pouring a ladle of crude down Barlow's throat.

The viewer is in the position of hating and fearing the Iraqi, but when the Iraqi tells Barlow that he lost his 1-year-old son to an American bomb, Mr. Russell cuts to a shot of the child in its crib as the ceiling caves in. When he asks how Barlow would feel if his wife and daughter were similarly crushed, Mr. Russell cuts to a shot of Barlow's wife and child as the walls explode around them.

"Three Kings" is not the first anti-war movie in which opposing soldiers have recognized themselves in one another before pulling the trigger, but it's the most brilliantly original in its eye for the warriors' common consumerism. The Iraqis

in "Three Kings" are not disciples of Al Qaeda, with its fundamentalist hatred of liberal Western materialism. One of Mr. Russell's chief satiric points is that American and Iraqi soldiers browse through the same catalogs. An Iraqi officer trying to escape from the smoke-filled bunker with a huge pile of blue jeans isn't so different from the Americans lugging bullion in Louis Vuitton bags, except in the scale of his ambition.

It is tempting to compare "Three Kings" to another recent war movie, "Tears of the Sun," in which a platoon of Navy Seals led by Bruce Willis elects to disobey orders and prevent a massacre of Nigerian civilians -- "for our sins," Willis says. "Tears of the Sun" strives to spin a heroic new myth of American interventionism -- which couldn't be further from Mr. Russell's intent. Although "Three Kings" recounts Saddam's crimes against his own people and makes the case that the first gulf war should have removed him from power, Mr. Russell says he is fiercely opposed to Operation Iraqi Freedom.

In an e-mail he writes, "When I made the movie, I felt that the abandonment of the Iraqi people at the war's end further pointed to the hypocrisy of our intervention: 'It's the oil, stupid, not the people. We don't care about the people or democracy, O.K.?'

"I was gonna say people are more informed today," he writes, "but I honestly don't think so -- I mean, very few people are talking about oil, or the other dictatorships, or how the real problem is how we've supported them and they spawn poverty and ignorance which fuels terrorism which grows out of Syria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and not Iraq so much" -- here his sentence structure breaks down -- "I mean, come on, it's a SCANDAL that Bush has pulled this off. It's mind-blowing."

Like his Iraqi torturer, Mr. Russell is still pouring oil down our collective throats.

He reports that "Three Kings" is popular among gulf war veterans, however: "After all, the film was informed by the experiences of the vets I had spoken to, who saw the boredom, felt mystified by the purpose of the war, witnessed the crushing of the democratic uprising after we'd 'defeated' Saddam," he writes.

"Other than that, all that comes to mind is that I and the producers and Warner Brothers were given an award by the largest Arab organization in the United States for our humane portrayal of Arabs. And my phone is tapped. I'm not sure by whom, but I know it's tapped and I've had experts confirm it. You can hear them click on to every phone call."

Even if someone regards Mr. Russell as a propagandist for the enemy, it hasn't stopped the military from swiping his visual palette and his syntax. Mr. Russell is sure that one particular branch loved "Three Kings": "Unfortunately, the Armed Forces recruitment commercials have adopted the look of the film -- blown out, grainy, kinetic, CNNish," he writes.

Whatever elements of "Three Kings" may have been appropriated for militaristic ends, however, the original will never lose its power to shock. It remains the most caustic anti-war movie of this generation.

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