

David Bowie's performance in Ōshima Nagisa's 1983 film *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* is among his very best. Here the producer Jeremy Thomas recalls their time shooting in the South Pacific

INTERVIEW BY LIZ TRAY

'HE WAS HAPPY TO BE BURIED UP TO HIS NECK IN THE SAND FOR NIGHTS ON END'



It's fair to say that 1982 was a busy year for David Bowie. It started with the filming of Tony Scott's erotic vampire picture *The Hunger*. It ended with him recording his most successful album, *Let's Dance*, with Nile Rodgers. And in the middle, he found himself on a desert island with legendary auteur Ōshima Nagisa making a brutal prisoner-of-war drama, *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*. Below, the film's producer, Jeremy Thomas, discusses the shoot, happy accidents and Bowie, his friend of more than 30 years.

LIZ TRAY: After Ōshima saw Bowie in *The Elephant Man* on Broadway, in 1980, he asked him to be part of his next film. How did you get involved?

JEREMY THOMAS: I'd sat next to Ōshima in the year that [Jerzy Skolimowski's] *The Shout* [1978] won the Grand Prix at Cannes. He was in his kimono and I was a young guy. The prize-giving dinner was different than today. It was an intimate affair. And he was very nice. We couldn't speak any language, but we had drinks together and laughed, then exchanged business cards. About three and a half years later, he got in touch and said, "I want to make this prison book. Are you interested?" I loved Ōshima's films and knew them well, so I jumped at the opportunity. We redeveloped the script by Paul Mayersberg and Ōshima wanted Robert Redford initially, he was blond and blue-eyed. During casting, Sakamoto [Ryuichi] and Kitano [Takeshi] came in and then Ōshima said, "Can you get me to David Bowie?"

I instantly embraced the idea. He was a great actor. He's a performer. He performed in the film, and in life. I had to get to him, [but] not via his big management. Because that's the way it works on something like this. We had two mutual friends, Italians who lived in London, who were friendly with David and they arranged a dinner. I said, "Do you know Ōshima?" He said, "Of course I know him" and reeled off all these film titles. I said, "Well, he wants you, he needs you."

LT: Bowie had a significant and lifelong interest in Japanese culture, film, theatre and literature.

JT: He knew all about it. It wasn't like he was somebody going, "Who is this filmmaker?" He was such a clever man, David. He knew everything about culture and Japanese cinema. Ōshima was a groundbreaking filmmaker. The content of his films was radical and Bowie was very attracted to the idea and put his heart and soul into it, turning up in Rarotonga [in the Cook Islands, where a large part of the film was shot] on a desert island that was eight miles around. It was very in the zeitgeist, Japan, at that moment. Ōshima was one of the greats and I think his films are much neglected by the public, like *The Ceremony* [1970] or *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* or *Boy* [both 1969]. He's fallen out of fashion but his films should be cherished. Especially when you think of what he was saying about Japanese society... I mean, *Parasite* [Bong Joon Ho, 2019] is just like one of his films, for example, what Ōshima was trying to expose.

LT: By then Bowie had left Berlin and started doing films but was about to take a serious left-turn and make himself into a million-selling stadium superstar.

JT: Yes, he was doing *Let's Dance*, so he left Rarotonga after filming and went to Australia to do that song's video with a lot of people from the film. Many who worked on that video were our crew, who he'd got to know.

LT: A harrowing prisoner of war camp drama, set in World War II, is an emotive and complex subject to make a film about, and then you juxtapose it with this pure pop record he's about to make.

JT: A lot of people didn't understand. It was a prisoner-of-war-camp film and maybe what was radical about it, it wasn't *The Bridge on the River Kwai* [1957], with military uniforms and saluting and all that; it was

not a camp like we'd seen before. In fact, it was a fantastic love story between two men [Bowie and Sakamoto, playing Major Celliers and Capt Yonoi]. I understood what it was immediately. It was subtext, but it was a different sort of love, an admiration. Celliers, his initials were JC, Jesus Christ. He's a blond God to Sakamoto. There is respect between military men. [Australian actor] Jack Thompson's and Tom Conti's parts, they're very nuanced. And Takeshi, what he says at the end, that's incredible. "We are victims of men who think they're right." But that's the truth. And you can see that we are currently [laughs] a victim of people who think they're right.

LT: Were you worried in those days about how the audience would feel regarding the queer subtext?

JT: It's not the way I do things. Of course, I'm thinking about the audience in one way. But I also wouldn't be making the films I've made if I was thinking about them. I'm thinking about: can this be a magnificent film which will rock people's socks off? And sometimes I manage. But the thought is not always, "Oh, is this going to be big box office?" Because if there was somebody who knew about that they'd be locked in a box and fed caviar! A few people have had that moment in their careers where they've had the Midas touch, but it's not what I want. I'm seeking something else with my choices and Ōshima fitted right into that because I was an incredible fan. And the subject matter was something I could be involved with because we put in the Britishness. We brought a very English group in: the production designers; from *Chariots of Fire* [1981] we had the art director, Andrew Sanders; and Lee Tamahori [Once Were Warriors, 1994] was the first AD.

LT: What were your first impressions of Bowie?

JT: Just a relaxed, easygoing, approachable man. I found him always to be just a regular guy. Just a guy who didn't have to do anything with us. He came on and did the Lindsay Kemp mime [in the cell scene, as the firing squad comes to get him] and Ōshima let him do it. He was a very cultivated person to be with. With the biggest stars, there was the impression you have: what they are is their public image, which is maybe miscalculated.

When you work with somebody, you see another side of them... but you can be unlucky. I've been unlucky a couple of times. [But] normally, it's just the person at work. A nice colleague who was really happy doing this film. Yeah, [he'd ride around on] the bicycle, among people who never knew who he was. He cycled around, he was free, people left him alone.

LT: Sakamoto wears make-up in the film, and I read that, in the 1940s, it was not uncommon for Japanese soldiers to wear it.

JT: Well, that was very much Bowie. Antony Clavet [who had done Bowie's make-up for *Just a Gigolo*, 1978, for *Lodger's* 1979 album cover and for *The Hunger*] was the make-up artist who had done Bowie on tour and Bowie suggested to Ōshima, "Listen, why don't we get something special for Ryuichi?", who loved the idea. Clavet did some very stylised make-up, which was a miracle.

LT: The Cannes press conference is on the film's DVD extras. I enjoyed the relationship between Bowie and Ōshima on the panel, how they were together.

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JT: Ōshima was an extraordinary man and Bowie had a deep respect for him. He'd do whatever he told him, you know? He saw Ōshima as a teacher and Ōshima gave him the space to do what he wanted. Such as when he was happy to be buried up to his neck in the sand, for nights on end. He was sitting on a chair in the hole before we put on the sand. You get him out quick. And the moth [landing on Bowie's head, in the night scene] was a coincidence.

LT: Were there any other happy accidents in filming?

JT: Yes, the kiss [where Celliers kisses Yonoi on each cheek, which seals his fate]. It's slow-mo like that because the camera jerked and we didn't know for two or three weeks, we had to send the rushes from the desert island to Tokyo. Ōshima said "OK, I'm going to print that," click-click-click, it was like 12 frames. That's called the random quality of art!

LT: After the film, did you want to work with him again? Or did you just stay friends?

JT: I remained very friendly with him. I probably saw him a couple years before he died. Whenever I went to New York, we went out, maybe for a tofu dinner with him and Iman. We had very good mutual friends and he stayed friendly, not an intimate friend but a good friend in the city. He was a cinema fan. We talked about films. He knew everything about everything, a Renaissance man.

I made *Naked Lunch* [in 1991, with David Cronenberg] and David told me that when he was younger, he'd go to Soho with the book in the pocket of his jacket, peeking out, just to show that he understood what was going on, though he didn't really understand what was in the book at the time. He was an incredible person who brought a bit of that fairy dust into *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*. And he knew that and he was very clever with that. But he wasn't overbearing. He was a joy to behold, the way he was dignified. Of course, I had worked with Nic Roeg, I had done those two films with him, *Bad Timing* [1980] and *Eureka* [1983]. So we also had that bond, having [both] worked with Nic. Roeg was a very unusual man, a brilliant person, brilliant teacher, brilliant explainer.

LT: He worked with Julien Temple as well, just after you, on *Absolute Beginners* [1986]. And on a short film, a promo for one of his singles, called *Jazzin' for Blue Jean* [1984], which is incredibly funny. And he's a very good actor in that.

JT: Well, that never stopped, and in the end he was working with Tilda [Swinton, in the video for "The Stars (Are out Tonight)" in 2013]. He never stopped being on the forefront of imagination.

OPPOSITE, TOP
Producer Jeremy Thomas, first assistant director Lee Tamahori and Bowie during the filming of *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, in a never-before-seen photo

BELOW
Ōshima Nagisa (left) with Bowie on set



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