



Pharaoh

Polish director Jerzy Kawalerowicz's drama of Ancient Egypt has an epic sweep to match Joseph Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra*, and a central performance as tortured and naturalistic as anything the stars of Method managed

REVIEWED BY ADRIAN MARTIN

Jerzy Kawalerowicz; Poland 1966; Second Run; region-free Blu-ray; in Polish with English subtitles; Certificate 12; 152 minutes; 2.66:1. Extras: video lecture by critic Michał Oleszczyk; booklet.

Since the late 1990s, filmgoers have become accustomed to seeing certain visual phenomena conjured by CGI (computer-generated imagery) – and only very approximately or sketchily staged within the real, physical space in front of a movie camera. High in this genre of fabricated apparition come crowd shots: packs of hundreds of civilians in the street or soldiers on the battlefield.

From Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997) through Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004) to whichever epic TV event is currently streaming, the 'cut, multiply and paste' principle of crowd imagery is often painfully visible to the spectator's eye – depending on how much of the budget has been left for post-production finessing. It's possible, in the worst instances, to pick out the tiny assembly of living extras who have been coined into a distant, ghostly horde. Once such serial procedures became common to video game visualisation, it was only logical that conceptual art pieces (such as those by the Australian artist Baden Pailthorpe) would tinker with and exaggerate this mechanical, unreal, potentially infinite unfolding – showing armies marching forever through desert sands...

Jerzy Kawalerowicz's Polish super-production *Pharaoh*, however, hails from a proudly pre-digital moment in cinema – the painstaking preproduction began in 1962, and it was theatrically released in 1966. We are scarcely beyond the opening credits when Jerzy Wójcik's CinemaScope camera takes the opportunity to track ahead of a running man for almost a full minute – casually passing

literally hundreds of obediently waiting soldiers holding spears. The effect of this spectacular (if seemingly offhand) *mise en scène* is certainly impressive, yet it is not exactly the type of vast, lyrical grandeur we know from adventure classics like David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). The geometry of 'crowds and power' (to use the title of Elias Canetti's 1960 non-fiction book) as displayed here may be entirely real, but the mood is deliberately colder and harsher than anything cooked up with CGI.

Indeed, *Pharaoh* can be regarded, in its time as now, as a veritable anti-*Lawrence*. The setting is Ancient Egypt, as young Prince Ramses (Jerzy Zelnik) – a figure invented by Bolesław Prus for his globally successful 1897 novel – prepares to take the place of his wise father (Andrzej Girtler) and become Pharaoh Ramses number XIII. Ramses' enemies, however, are legion, since he opposes himself to the priesthood – a gang of rather sinister, secretive and strikingly bald-headed characters who wield enormous social power. In fact, their ability to manipulate the mass population into storming the central palace is a stunning prophecy of the actions of one Donald Trump!

Step by step, the film calmly traces the moves and counter-moves of a complicated power game. There are clandestine agreements, formal inquiries, and the accounting of dazzling gold reserves deep inside the palace labyrinth. Kawalerowicz is careful to break up the scenes set in oppressive interior spaces with sometimes cruel bouts of action out on the desert sands (filmed mainly



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in Uzbekistan). Music is sparsely laid on: the anguished sounds of howling winds or murmuring crowds remove us irrevocably from the gaudy ambience of such 1950s Hollywood epics as Michael Curtiz's *The Egyptian* or Howard Hawks's *Land of the Pharaohs*. In an intriguing paradox of cinema's powers of historical recreation, as certain recurring details (such as the elaborate headdresses of women and men alike) get weirder and more surreal, they seem more authentic.

Ramses XIII is a captivating antihero, lightly resonant with the many real-life youth rebellions of the 1960s. Dark-skinned, forever brooding, tragic hubris running high, he is unafraid to scandalise his imperious queen mother (Wiesława Mazurkiewicz), or follow the urgings of his libido with the faithful, pious Jewess Sarah (Krystyna Mikołajewska) and, subsequently, the more slippery Phoenician

femme fatale Kama (Barbara Brylska) – although only a slender piece of transparent clothing differentiates these women in Kawalerowicz's depiction of their alluring charms.

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Within the context of Polish cinema history, Kawalerowicz (*Mother Joan of the Angels*, 1961) is a formidable but also reasonably official, mainstream figure. Nobody could mistake the high style of *Pharaoh* for anything that, say, Jerzy Skolimowski was merrily inventing on the cheap during that same period in *Walker* (1965) or *Barrier* (1966). By the same

token, Kawalerowicz is far from being a rigidly classical director in the mould of Lean or Fred Zinnemann.

Doubtless taking a cue from the aesthetics of the ancient Egyptian art that is generously displayed in the magnificent sets (built in a Łódź studio), Kawalerowicz aims for a frequently frontal, 'presentational' effect – complete with many looks directly into the camera. Even the camera movements follow a rigorous, geometrical logic, performing sudden sharp turns and whip pans. There is an affinity here with the pictorial styles developed by Sergei Parajanov and Miklós Jancsó during the 60s and 70s.

This standalone release of *Pharaoh* by Second Run is an event to be celebrated. Although commercially successful and critically lauded in its day, the film, in all its big-budget splendour, had largely fallen out of circulation for many years. The beautiful restoration by Studio Kadr – which Kawalerowicz founded in 1955 and presided over until his death in 2007 – has previously been available to English-speaking audiences only on Volume 1 of Scorsese's *Masterpieces of Polish Cinema* box-set in 2014.

In a splendid, 68-minute video 'afterword', Michał Oleszczyk, seated behind a desk, delivers to camera a highly informative rundown of the various historical and cultural contexts that feed into *Pharaoh* – including its provocative allusion to the continuing influence of the Catholic Church over 60s Poland. More disc producers should use this straightforwardly academic lecture format and drop the often stilted 'interview an expert' device.

THE MAN WHO CAME TO DYNASTY (Opposite) Józef Czerniawski as Mentesufis, priest of Amon, Jerzy Zelnik as Ramses XIII, Stanisław Miłski as high priest Mephres; (above) Zelnik as Ramses, Leszek Herdegen as prophet Pentuer, Czerniawski as Mentesufis