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Rock the Casbah! 'Lawrence of Arabia' at Seattle Center

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August 16, 2006
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"Lawrence of Arabia" at Seattle Center
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A summer night under the stars with a young Peter O'Toole – and a generous serving of Omar Sharif on the side? Where do I sign up?

Seattle Center's "Movies at the Mural" season continues on Saturday, Aug. 19 with Sir David Lean's 1962 epic ["Lawrence of Arabia,"](#) the tale of British military officer and adventurer T.E. Lawrence and his role in uniting the Arab tribes against the Turks in World War I. Part John Ford Western, part "Citizen Kane" in flowing robes, "Lawrence" rewards your time investment with Lean's vision and execution, Maurice Jarre's evocative score and enough star power to knock you flat.

The nearly four-hour production is divided into two parts. The true stars of the first half are the landscape and Freddie Young's breathtaking cinematography. Shot in Morocco, Jordan and southern Spain and gorgeous even on a 19-inch TV set, this footage will be a dream to see on the big screen at the Mural Amphitheatre. Lean layers visual spectacle, music, natural sound and silence on top of each other to create a hypnotic sensory experience.

The other things that make the film great are its politics, scenes of guerilla warfare and its deep, probing look into the title character – the struggle between the flawed man he is and the figure he (with the complicity of others) has constructed himself to be. Peter O'Toole, in his first film role, plays Lawrence with the quiet power of a man who knows he is extraordinary. "Not many people have a destiny," his commanding officer tells him, and we know that Lawrence's is both his gift and his burden.

O'Toole is joined in the cast by one heavy-hitter after another. Each new character's arrival on the screen brings a smile to your face; you can't wait to see who'll next ride up out of the horizon. Yet these giants all disappear into their roles; the film is a study in "less is more" acting. Anthony Quinn is a delight as the lionish tribe leader Auda abu Tayi, imbuing him with dignity and humor. Alec Guinness is the savvy Prince Feisal, who retains allegiance to his people and traditions but understands the importance of playing the game with the British generals. As a sadistic Turkish bey, Jose Ferrer turns his five minutes of screen time into a memorably grotesque performance. And Omar Sharif, as Lawrence's brother in arms Ali, is at once rakish and regal ... oh, and smoking hot.

It seems not a question of if, but of when, Hollywood will see fit to remake this classic, with Brad Pitt in the title role and computer-generated imagery (CGI) technology to "improve upon" the actual North African desert. I can't stop that from happening. But I can urge you to bring a cushion, have an extra jolt of caffeine and let "Lawrence of Arabia" wash over you like a hot, pure desert breeze. "Masterpiece" is a word that, through careless overuse, has lost much of its meaning – but if this film hasn't earned the distinction, I'd like to know who a critic has to kiss to get the standards changed.

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