

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

Treading too carefully in the sands of Dune

David Lynch's 1984 film adaptation of the Frank Herbert novel *Dune* suffered scathing criticism for its irreverent reconfiguring of Herbert's vision. Yet a forthcoming, six-hour television adaptation of the same novel demonstrates that fervent Herbert acolytes can also spoil the story with the mere force of their own zeal. (Sci-Fi Channel, in three instalments from Sunday December 3 until Tuesday December 5, at 9pm ET/PT.)

Many of this new production's creators regarded this project as the fulfilment of a lifelong fantasy. According to *The Secrets of Dune*, the companion novel to the mini-series, executive producer Richard P. Rubinstein bought the television rights to the six-volume series the day the estate made the rights available.

When he heard about the project, actor William Hurt contacted the director and asked to be cast as Duke Leto, which he was.

The resulting work leads one to suspect that the cast and crew were so worshipful, in fact, that they didn't want to commit the sacrilege of making a film that would upstage the book.

To be fair, it would have been difficult for any film to include all the book's entwined themes: science-fiction, ecological, religious. David Lynch's 1984 film version made the ill-fated error of squeezing these elements into one cluttered heap.

As if in a backlash to Lynch, Rubinstein has gone too far in the opposite extreme, reducing the story to its mystical, messianic thread. Its overly serious interpretation of outer-space ethics remind me of a pamphlet a Scientist once handed me.

Most of the Herbert novel's science fiction elements and philosophical underpinnings have been eliminated. Some of the most crucial concepts are glossed over, such as the Mentat – humans who act as computers after artificial intelligence has been banned from the galaxy.

In a lesser production, such oversights would signal that the level of discourse has been dumbed down. In this mini-series, however, it means the opposite: the screenwriters assume everyone has read the books. This might make the viewers feel clever, but it also puts an undue burden on the audience to fill in the story gaps.

While the script is skimpy, this film succeeds as a mood piece. It is a magnificent visual accompaniment to the printed word, though it cannot be appreciated or comprehended independently of the book.

The novel devotes a good amount of discussion to the notion of creating a breathable atmosphere on Dune. In the same spirit, this film's production designer (Miljen Kljakovic, who previously worked on the 1991 Carot/Jeunet film, *Delicatessen*) has manufactured a convincing fictional desert planet out of thin air.

The sand-worms are awesomely paradoxical, lunging out of the sand with the grace of whales, yet as disgusting-looking as gigantic stomach parasites.

Each ruling family is given its own design scheme, carefully selected to allude to an earthly empire: House Atreides, from which the protagonist Paul arises, bears a remarkable resemblance to the Medici Chapel in Florence. The Harkonnens – the dynasty that includes

the evil, corpulent Baron and his toadying nephews – are dressed in the fashion of early Imperial Japan, with the soldiers clad in a space-age version of Japanese medieval armour.

Even the sound effects reveal an impressive attention to detail: a low-frequency, barely audible humming plays constantly in the background. In context, it seems quite believable that a world that has been stripped of its technology might well sound like that.

Most science fiction films, from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) to *Close Encounters* (1977) and beyond, seem to be in agreement that advanced alien species talk and move very slowly. Rubinstein's *Dune* is in the same vein: the characters' movements are controlled and stylised, as in a modified ballet, particularly during duelling scenes.

On the whole, the cast is strong. Ian McNiece interprets the Baron Harkonnen character as a classic Shakespearean villain before the fall, giving much oomph to such lines as: "Need you more evidence of what heaven's choice is? Atreides is dead and Harkonnen lives."

William Hurt is sublimely suited to play the guiltily privileged Duke Leto. Sadly, the weakest link is the pivotal role of Leto's son Paul (Alec Newman), who is played as a whiny, milque-toast farm-boy, as if Luke Skywalker created the mould for space war heroes.

Perhaps there never will be a consummate *Dune* film. We will have to settle for each devotee making his own film version, each based on the premise that the previous versions got the book all wrong. Meanwhile, stick with the book.

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