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Adventurous 'Lost City' reflects on legacy, life's purpose

In Q&A, director says he wanted to share story in jungle without romanticizing it

Machu Picchu was discovered by the outside world in 1911. Ernest Shackleton launched his Imperial Trans-Antarctic expedition in 1914. King Tut was exhumed in 1923.

It was during this extraordinary period of geographical exploration and archeological discovery that Percy Fawcett (Charlie Hunnam), the hero of director James Gray's painterly and poetic atmospheric dream-scape, "The Lost City of Z," was both maligned and acclaimed as one of England's bravest explorers.

A land surveyor, intelligence officer and unlicked cub, Fawcett was the son of a disgraced British aristocrat ("unfortunate in his choice of ancestors" demurs one celebrant at a ball for the Archduke Ferdinand, as the doors to the room where it happens are quietly closed to exclude Fawcett) he was uniquely primed physically and psychologically to seek redemption in the South American jungle.

Sent to South America by the Royal Geographical Society to survey and map the Brazilian-Bolivian boundary as border wars began to interfere with imperial designs on the rubber trade, Fawcett found evidence of an ancient civilization, long reclaimed by the green desert of the Amazon rain forest.

Accompanied by his capable and loyal aide-de-camp, Henry Costin (a superb Robert Pattinson), and later his son Jack (Tom

Holland), Fawcett time and again braved the perils of the Amazon — poison arrows, piranhas, deadly insects and cannibalism — to verify his archeological find. His suffragette wife Nina (Sienna Miller), conducted research for him and longed, futilely, to join an exploration.

More than a historic biopic, "The Lost City of Z," based on the 2009 book of the same name by David Grann, is a reflection on legacy and life's purpose.

Fawcett's willingness to respect and learn from the indigenous tribes is contrasted with the Royal Geographical Society establishment's refusal to consider that Amazonian "savages" could have once lived in an advanced society characterized by artistic, mechanical or architectural sophistication.

In an interview I had with director James Gray, we discussed the appeal of Fawcett's story and the choices he made while telling it in this film. Below are edited excerpts from that discussion.

Rebecca Ford: You have said that you communicated with your cinematographer Darius Khondji about the look of the film using paintings. Which ones?

James Gray: That's a good question. We looked at Henri Rousseau for the jungle and we looked at Claude Lorrain for the U.K. portions. ... We looked at Turner. We looked at Gainsborough. I would say those are the key guys. The important thing



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about Rousseau for us was ... we wanted to approach Amazonia the way a Western European would approach it but also without condescension, with a certain love for it but without an exoticizing of it ... we tried to approach the jungle as not a romanticized, exoticized "other," but just as an "other," because that's how [Fawcett] would have perceived it.

Ford: Will you talk about what Fawcett's experience as someone who is striving means for audiences?

Gray: You know, we have such a bad tendency as a species to force upon each other a ranking. The upper classes looked down on Fawcett because his father was really kind of a loser and had

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destroyed the family fortune and ruined the family name. [The father] was in rarified social circles, he was equerry to Prince Edward, later Edward VII, and drank himself into the grave,

gambled away all the money. ...

And Western Europe looked down on South America, and in South America you had the rubber barons using slaveholders, and slaveholders looking down on slaves and indigenous people of different regions warring against each other, so ... the striving comes from a place of inadequacy, having to fill a hole, having to rectify a lack within. And I felt that that lack in his case came really from a level of disgrace that he had to make up for it in some way. ...

What I saw that's interesting was the idea that class had a very powerful impact on the way he lived his life and in some ways that striving was the source of both his greatness and his folly. And that's a very complex idea that I think in some way doesn't get old, doesn't date.

Ford: There were so many stories you could have told about Fawcett. How did you make the choice to tell this story this way?

Gray: Here's the thing. To me what mattered was how do you make this personal, as egomaniacal as this sounds, how do you make it about you. ... I tried to communicate what was personal to me, and what was personal to me was his relationship with his son. What was personal to me was the nature of his obsession. ...

I just gravitated toward what was personal to me and what was personal to me ultimately was the father-son story. To me that was what was emotional, and the initial rejection of that relationship, and the acceptance of that relationship as the story progressed. ...

The best advice I ever got in my life, if I may drop a name, was from Francis [Ford] Coppola. He said "make it personal to you because there is only one of you," which I think is really beautiful.

BONUS FEATURE

For a video excerpt of Rebecca Ford's interview with director James Gray on balancing truth and spectacle in the making of "The Lost City of Z," visit chicagolawbulletin.com or Ford's YouTube channel at youtube.com/rlf773.