

2010

Review of Out of Africa

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Recommended Citation

Adams, Michael, "Review of Out of Africa" (2010). *CUNY Academic Works*.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/146

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Out of Africa (Blu-ray)

(Universal, 4.27.2010)

When people complain about the films undeservedly receiving the best-picture Oscar, *Out of Africa* is one of the frequent targets. As with *The English Patient* and *Shakespeare in Love*, Sydney Pollack's film is the kind of lush, romantic drama that drives some, especially fanboys, nuts. Often dismissed a slick piece of Hollywood kitsch, *Out of Africa* succeeds in part because it's a slick piece of Hollywood kitsch, with echoes of *The Letter*, *Casablanca*, *The African Queen*, and *Lawrence of Arabia*. One could easily imagine Katharine Hepburn or Ingrid Bergman playing Danish writer Karen Blixen, aka Isak Dinesen, but Meryl Streep is much better.

Regardless of how you feel about the rest of *Out of Africa*, its main asset is Streep. I'm not sure how accurate her Danish accent is, but while some actors use accents as a crutch, even Streep herself at times ("A dingo ate my baby"), here it is simply one of several tools helping her to explore a complex character. Certainly Streep's mannered, but when is she not? Her mannerisms are actually much subtler than usual. Compare Streep here to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or *Sophie's Choice*. She is also more attractive than anywhere else, with Pollack and cinematographer David Watkin clearly loving her face. Notice also how fluid she seems while all the other women are stiff. Robert Redford, as big-game hunter Denys Finch Hatton, looks the same from scene to scene, but Streep is a chameleon, constantly changing to reflect the character's emotional turmoil.

Sure, *Out of Africa* isn't perfect. While Streep plays well off Redford, Klaus Maria Brandauer, as her husband, and the great Michael Kitchen, as Finch Hatton's friend, the scenes with the other Kenya settlers are a bit strained, the attitude toward the native Kenyans is close to condescending, and Finch Hatton's British accent is strangely missing. As wonderful as he can be, Redford is always essentially playing Redford. His Finch Hatton speaks in aphorisms that would sound just as natural coming from Jay Gatsby or the Sundance Kid.

What's important is that *Out of Africa* is big and episodic and seductively romantic. Making its Blu-ray debut on its twenty-fifth anniversary, the film, sometimes dismissed as a *National Geographic* travelogue, is certainly marvelous to look at. Watkin (*Help!*, *Catch-22*, *Chariots of Fire*) is a great cinematographer, equally adept at interiors and exteriors. His images were too soft in the previous DVD incarnations of *Out of Africa* but are strong and detailed here. The widescreen shots of the African landscape, especially during the flying scene, perfectly capture its dangerous beauty. Unfortunately, the artificiality of two rear-projection scenes is even more annoying on Blu-ray. One aspect of Blu-ray often ignored is its ability to heighten performances. Actors rely heavily upon their eyes, and Blu-ray clarifies the emotions coming from the intense eyes of Streep, Redford, Brandauer, and Kitchen.

With one exception, the extras for *Out of Africa* are carryovers from the 2000 DVD. In his commentary Pollack discusses how the film varies from historical truth for dramatic effect. The emphasis is on the difficulties of making a film on location in Africa and on the contributions of his collaborators, particularly Streep and Redford. Pollack explains that Kitchen, a master of subtlety, was cast, after the director saw him in a television production, because his style would not clash with the approaches of the two stars.

The main extra is “A Song of Africa,” a 73-minute look at both Dinesen’s life, with dozens of black-and-white photographs, and the making of the film, with appearances by Pollack, Streep, screenwriter Kurt Luedtke, and Judith Thurman, whose biography of the writer is one of the sources for *Out of Africa*. Pollack says a key to understanding Dinesen was that she “wanted to be considered sensual but wasn’t considered sensual by others.” Thurman says she was drawn to Finch Hatton because “she worshipped virility.”

According to Pollack he did not originally think of Redford, with whom he had made five previous films, for the role of Finch Hatton but came to consider him perfect, despite the lack of a British accent or any other English qualities, because he “is more self-possessed than any British actor.” Streep enjoys pointing out that Brandauer is difficult and complicated, not out for a good time. She is delightful when she imitates the noises made by lions and hippopotami.

John Barry is especially eloquent in examining his score. The film’s main theme was inspired by the look of wonder on Streep’s face on the train taking Blixen to Kenya. Barry also created a counter-melody to convey her sense of loss.

The only new extra for the Blu-ray is fifteen minutes of deleted scenes, mostly consisting of trims at the beginnings or ends of existing scenes, as with Blixen’s first sight of the interior of her house. Though all these shots are extraneous, one is of interest to those who wonder why those fighting the Germans during the Great War are lined up to greet Blixen when she arrives at their camp.—Michael Adams

Out of Africa is a 1985 American epic romantic drama film directed and produced by Sydney Pollack, and starring Robert Redford and Meryl Streep. The film is based loosely on the autobiographical book *Out of Africa* written by Isak Dinesen (the pseudonym of Danish author Karen Blixen), which was published in 1937, with additional material from Dinesen's book *Shadows on the Grass* and other sources.