

# The Year of Living Dangerously

Reviewed by Max Lane

The Year of Living Dangerously is the second major film produced by Australians and set in Asia. The first one was "Far East". The interest in making such films must be welcomed and it is important that we all go to watch them. However it is important always to watch them with a critical eye. And this is especially the case with "The Year of Living Dangerously".

It is a film which, precisely because of its entertaining success in capturing some of the so-called colour and atmosphere of Asia, will most probably be quite effective in assisting to consolidate irrational approaches by Australians in understanding Asian societies.

It is not that the film engages in any kind of denigrating racism; in fact it obviously sets out to be sympathetic in its general treatment of Indonesia. The problem is more located in the film's — and the book's for that matter — propagation of a view of Indonesian society which essentially confers on that society an aspect of mysteriousness and inscrutability — in other words an alienness which defies the understanding of a westerner.

This comes out in a number of ways. It is manifested, for example, in the role of the character Billy Kwan. Kwan is the only person who is depicted as having genuine contact with Indonesian society. It is Kwan who provides the "ins" to Guy Hamilton, the inexperienced journalist. It is Kwan who has an actual friend among the masses, *Ibu*, the poverty stricken slum woman. Kwan contrasts markedly with the other western correspondents who are depicted as hiding away from society in the bar of the Intercontinental Hotel. They make only sporadic forays outside to grab fleeting interviews with Palace officials or fleeing liaisons with impoverished prostitutes.

But Kwan is not really a "Western correspondent". Kwan is a being whose features correspond to the way in which Indonesia itself is depicted. He is a dwarf — half-child and half-adult; he is an Eurasian — half-eastern and half-western and neither this nor that, he is destined not to obtain the object of his desires — his beautiful jilly. It is in fact Kwan who reveals to Guy Hamilton the journalist the secret of understanding Indonesia. Indonesia, or rather Java, says Kwan can only be understood through the *Wayang*, the traditional shadow puppet play. This, he tells Guy, depicts the eternal struggle between left and right, between the Pendarwa and Kurawa, between good and evil. But it is not really between good and evil, for he goes on to point out that the *Wayang* knows no crude dichotomies but is sensitive to all shades of things in life.

And that is how Indonesia is depicted throughout the film; a land of inexplicable conflict between shadowy, unclear forces. But this conflict is not explained. It is just there. Like the eternally present struggle of *Wayang*

Guy Hamilton and Billy Kwan are caught up in a demonstration during the 1965 Indonesian upheaval in Alim's 'The Year of Living Dangerously'.



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stories. It is just a part of the strangeness of Asia. What war, and in, it takes in that conflict is completely ignored.

One example is the conversion of Billy Kwan from somebody sympathetic to Sukarno, the humanitarian, to someone who hates him. This conversion occurs, without any early signs of it as a trend, in a matter of seconds. It occurs when he sees the dead body of *Ibu's* little son.

Kwan's sympathy for Sukarno and all he stands for — the popular demonstration, the anti-imperialism — vanishes in one second. Why must this occur in Kwan? The problem is that the inscrutability of Asia, being eternal and therefore without cause, is repeated in the film from the real life of Indonesian society. The craziness of Sukarno's demagogic behaviour, the confused conflict, the demonstrations and rioting, are made a part of the inscrutable gance. On the other hand, the death of *Ibu's* child, impinging on Billy Kwan's personal emotions so strongly is whited, partly at least, into the arena of real life. Kwan's conversion to anti-Sukarnism is an act which implicitly gives up the *Wayang* notion of what Indonesia is about. In fact, at the end of the film the views of the earlier all-knowing Kwan become identical with those of the bar-secluded western journalists. According to them Sukarno only cared about making speeches.

The contradiction of the film is that it sets up its Indonesia context in the inscrutable, alien, oriental vein, understandable only to someone who is himself inscrutable. It then resolves the problems of its political position with an unbelievable collapse by the person who is supposed to see through all inscrutability back into the old stereotypical criticisms of the western establishment. But Kwan had no choice; his *Wayang* orientism offers no reasons for why things happened the way they did, and neither does this film.