

THE BADLANDS COLLECTIVE
presents



SAINT JACK

A 35mm presentation
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London
24 November, 2022



1979 / USA-Singapore / 112 mins

Directed by Peter Bogdanovich

Written by Howard Sackler, Peter Bogdanovich, Paul Theroux

Based on the novel by Paul Theroux

Starring Ben Gazzara, Denholm Elliott, Monika Subramaniam, Peter Bogdanovich, George Lazenby, Lisa Lu

Saint Jack is one of Peter Bogdanovich's most distinctive and special films. Driven by a Ben Gazzara performance in which a hard-bitten character navigates a murky and often dangerous world, and approaches a moral crossroads, it has a kinship with John Cassavetes' *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976), Gazzara's other signature role of the decade. But *Saint Jack* has a more casual mood, world-weary yet freewheeling, drifting along with Jack Flowers and soaking up his encounters as an American expat pimp in Singapore almost improvisationally. Before the film ratchets up tension in its few brilliantly paced suspense sequences, it's languid, funny, wry and wistful.

The end of the 1970s was a transitional period for director Peter Bogdanovich. The success he'd enjoyed at the start of the decade was on the wane, the New Hollywood movement he'd spearheaded was coming to an abrupt end, and his relationship with Cybill Shepherd, his romantic partner and most important creative collaborator of the decade, was almost over. His work on *Saint Jack* begins with Shepherd and, perhaps inevitably, Orson Welles, with whom Bogdanovich had become increasingly close throughout the 70s.

Bogdanovich wanted to collaborate with Welles on an adaptation of Paul Theroux's novel but the rights were owned by Playboy Enterprises, who at the time were branching out into other entertainment avenues, including literary properties. In a bizarre twist of fate, Playboy magazine ran a feature comprised of pictures of nude actresses from recent releases, which included photos of Cybill Shepherd in Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* (1971). Shepherd commenced legal proceedings against the company and, upon Welles's advice, agreed to settle in exchange for the rights to *Saint Jack*, which resulted in the parties eventually collaborating on the film.

Bogdanovich attempted to make *Saint Jack* in Hollywood, but the major studios insisted on a bankable star rather than his preferred choice Gazzara, so the filmmaker turned to his old friend and mentor Roger Corman, who had given him his start as a director with 1968's *Targets*. Prior to shooting, Bogdanovich and Gazzara spent weeks immersing themselves in Singapore's nightlife as they reworked Theroux's story, and the film makes a few key structural changes to the novel.

Jack's encounter with Triad gangs, told in flashback in the book, is introduced to the main narrative, and the character of William Leigh (Denholm Elliott), who suffers a fatal heart attack near the start of Theroux's story, becomes a recurring character here. William is a wide-eyed outsider being introduced as we are to Jack's milieu, and a crucial foil around whom Jack can drop his guard, offering a more empathetic presence than the coarse and buffoonish English expats with whom he is usually forced to socialise. The film's conception of Jack is different too. He's a more confident figure than he is on the page, where he often reveals his insecurities about his place in this world, and Gazzara's magnificently charming and lived-in performance makes him an incredibly witty and compelling protagonist to hang out with.

Shooting in Singapore during this era was more than challenging. The make-up of the country's film production infrastructure was changing dramatically; after decades as a key location for American and European productions, it had become a more hostile place for foreign filmmakers. In his book *Kinda Hot: The Making of Saint Jack in Singapore* (the definitive resource on this film, which we found invaluable in putting together these notes), Ben Slater highlights the mondo-style German 'documentary' *Shocking Asia*, which was shot in Singapore, as the

catalyst for the crackdown. It meant that Bogdanovich had to convince the local authorities that he was actually shooting a throwback caper movie called *Jack of Hearts*, even going so far as to provide them with a dummy treatment for the phantom film. Slater's book brilliantly documents the often comical lengths to which Bogdanovich and his crew went to shoot *Saint Jack* in these trying circumstances, and to this day, *Saint Jack* remains the only American feature to be entirely shot on location in Singapore, where it was banned for decades.

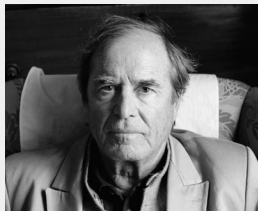
Despite the government's aversion to the finished film, *Saint Jack* is a loving portrait of the city-state, and a document of certain corners that are no more, such as the 'Boogie Street' red light district, some of whose transgender sex workers play themselves in the film. Bogdanovich's insistence on casting non-actor locals lends a great authenticity to many scenes in *Saint Jack*, and provides a rich portrait of the country's ethnic diversity, where citizens of Malaysian, Chinese, Indian and other Asian origins exist alongside Westerners. Aside from being a parable in which the postcolonial British lick their wounds and serve as a cautionary tale to the imperial adventurism of Vietnam War-era Americans, *Saint Jack* is a record of a bustling Singapore in the early decades of its independence. The rich atmosphere, captured on the fly under sometimes very low light by Robby Müller's roving camera, is just one of the aspects that makes this film feel special.

Bogdanovich was coming off a trio of high-profile box office disappointments in the form of *Daisy Miller* (1974), *At Long Last Love* (1975) and *Nickelodeon* (1976), one of which was a period piece star vehicle for Shepherd and two of which dealt with the filmmaker's familiar obsession of tributes to Hollywood's golden age. It proved uniquely refreshing and poignant for Bogdanovich to make a film so immediate, in such an unfamiliar location, at this point in his career. In leaving his comfort zone to think on his feet this way, he ironically ended up making the closest thing he ever made to his own *Casablanca* (1942) - a movie about a wizened American in an exotic locale, who ends up making a tough personal decision as an act of resistance.

Bogdanovich followed *Saint Jack* in 1981 with another masterful collaboration with Ben Gazzara, *They All Laughed*. This film marked the end of an era for the director and set the course for a devastating event that would cast a dark shadow over his personal life at the beginning of the new decade, something he detailed in his painfully candid book *Killing of the Unicorn* in 1984. After that, Bogdanovich's career trajectory grew more wayward, and perhaps we can understand why obituaries focused so heavily on his early successes, but there are gems to be discovered throughout his later years. Bogdanovich proved himself a success as a director-for-hire with *Mask* (1985), and he revisited the melancholy terrain of *The Last Picture Show* with his undervalued sequel *Texasville* (1990). He indulged his lifelong love of screwball comedy with *Noises Off* (1992) and *She's Funny That Way* (2014), although he lost control of the latter film, which was drastically reedited against his wishes. The discovery of Bogdanovich's workprint in 2020 and subsequent screenings of his original vision under the title *Squirrels to the Nuts* (a nod to Lubitsch) offered viewers a more fitting swansong for this great cineaste.

We lost Bogdanovich earlier this year at the age of 82, and Robby Müller four years ago at the age of 78 after a long struggle with vascular dementia. They're the kind of artists who have always inspired us to put on screenings, and we're delighted to shine a light on the special and underseen *Saint Jack* from a very rare 35mm archive print.

-The Badlands Collective, Nov 2022



A NOTE FROM PAUL THEROUX

It's the fruit of my three years living in Singapore, 1968-71 where I was on the English Dept of the University of Singapore. My last real job, the last time I earned a salary. The story was stimulated by the visit of a British professor from Cambridge. He was about 50 years old and boasted of being able to beat anyone at squash half his age. He spent a week (his role was 'External Examiner') Lots of squash, lots of work - but no one liked him. We gave him a party at a Chinese restaurant, The Celestial Room, and after a huge meal and dancing with some Chinese beauties, he collapsed and died of a heart attack. His widow was phoned. She instructed us to cremate him and sing hymns, which we dutifully did, ashamed of having said wicked things about him.

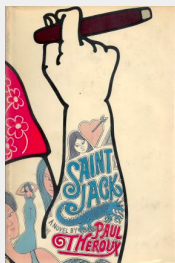
I thought: this is an episode - but who is recalling it?


I was then 28 years old, and 50 seemed elderly to me. My narrator would be 50, an American in Singapore. The Vietnam War was raging, the soldiers often vacationing at a hotel/brothel near my house. I often stopped in to talk to them about the war. Singapore was modernizing - old buildings being pulled down. I wanted to describe the Singapore I knew that was disappearing. Also the life of a expatriate free spirit. I made notes and wrote a few pages. Then I was fired - my contract not renewed. I had a wife and two small children (Marcel and Louis, now famous in their own right.)

My wife found us a cottage in Dorset, near the village of Netherbury (and near Bridport.) I wrote the book from Nov 1971 to April 1972 in that cottage. Then we moved to Ealing, West London and looking for a quiet place to type the final version I borrowed a friend's flat in Notting Hill (Westbourne Grove) and spent the month of May 1972 typing (drinking at the pub The Sun in Splendour.) I sold the book to The Bodley Head Ltd - my advance £250.

The book appeared to great reviews a year later. The film rights were sold. Peter Bogdanovich and I wrote most of the screenplay. He filmed it in 1978 entirely on location in Singapore, where it was banned until just a few years ago. I urged him to shoot the film using backgrounds that were disappearing. So it shows a Singapore that no longer exists.

I am very fond of the book, I like the film, and Peter Bogdanovich and I remained friends until his death - he was planning to create a TV series, with an older St Jack, to be shot in Thailand, and the day before he died he said, "Let's talk tomorrow - I've got some ideas."





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