



Dean Spanley

100 minutes, 2008, New Zealand/UK

Director: Toa Fraser

Cast: Jeremy Northam, Sam Neill, Bryan Brown, Peter O'Toole

Synopsis:

Set in Edwardian England where upper lips are always stiff and men from the Colonies are not entirely to be trusted, Fisk Senior has little time or affection for his son, but when the pair visit an eccentric Indian, they start a strange journey that eventually allows the old man to find his heart.

Review: Phillip French, The Observer

A British film, featuring some of our finest actors, touching affectingly on relationships between fathers and sons and fathers and daughters without getting unduly sentimental, and having a literate script. It moves from everyday reality into realms of fantasy and doesn't constantly allude to popular Hollywood films. It features in a supporting role an outsize performance as a lovable eccentric by an actor who has been dubbed a national treasure - Peter O'Toole.

Dean Spanley is an Anglo-New Zealand co-production developed from a novella written in the 1930s by Lord Dunsany, an Irish writer interested in the occult, and adapted by the Scottish novelist Alan Sharp, best known for his scripts for Hollywood genre movies, Ulzana's Raid, Night Moves and Rob Roy among them.

Directed by the New Zealand film-maker Toa Fraser and sensitively lit by Leon Narbey, it's set in Edwardian England immediately after the Boer War. The elderly, self-centred widower Horatio Fisk (Peter O'Toole) cannot come to terms with his elder son's death in the war and the subsequent demise of his grieving wife. His other son, the dedicated Henslowe (Jeremy Northam), seeks to console him but can't win his love. On an outing to pass an idle afternoon, they attend a lecture by an Indian swami on 'The Transmigration of Souls'.

This is a delightful, oddly moving film, immaculately acted, carefully skirting whimsy, and nicely located in its period. It goes far beyond those wacky Disney comedies in which humans find themselves occupying the bodies of cats and dogs.

Sam Neill: Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian

Sam Neill took off for Australia in the late 70s after peeking at the casting notes in his file at New Zealand's national broadcasting company. "Could be all right in homosexual roles," was the single line jotted next to his name. That was when he knew he had to leave the country, he says today, sitting in an empty bar in London an hour or two before the UK premiere of his latest film, Dean Spanley. "I wasn't offended. I just knew that it wasn't going to be a big career. People weren't writing a lot of homosexual roles in New Zealand."

That stereotype is now well out of date, but you can imagine the young Neill presenting a quandary: devilishly good-looking but reticent; not hungry enough, the thinking might have gone, to play the leading man. Still, that reserve has served Neill well, a vital component in some of his best parts. Think of him in *The Piano*, as Holly Hunter's frustrated husband, face fixed with the creeping suspicion he is being outwitted, and making perfect sense of that finger-chopping scene. More recently, he was brilliant as a badly dressed gay drug dealer, uncomfortable in his own skin, in the Australian indie *Little Fish*, with a bad hair-dye job and more gold jewellery than is dignified for a man.

I had been warned Neill is quiet and thoughtful, that he might need geeing-up to keep things moving - buttoned-up is a description that pops up time and again in interviews. Actually, he seems a bit anxious about the premiere, and one of the first things he says about Dean Spanley is that he turned down the part three times. Hardly surprising, since it's a role that requires him to literally howl at the moon