

Living

Weekend guide



## Surprising weight of 'Four Feathers'

Macho movie with little hokum and young stars Ledger, Hudson



Heath Ledger as Harry Faversham in "The Four Feathers."

By David Elliot  
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Sept. 19, 2002— "The Four Feathers" is a very light title for a movie of unexpected weight — the toughest, brawniest version yet of A.E.W. Mason's old British Empire saga about a "coward" who redeems himself through fantastic bravery. There were versions in 1915, 1921, 1929, 1955, 1978 (for TV) — and the most famous in 1939, starring Ralph Richardson. Now Shekhar Kapur has filmed it again, with most of the tin-toy soldier piety wiped away and yet not replaced by cynicism. His soldiers dream, adventure, suffer and often die.

KAPUR MADE "Bandit Queen" and "Elizabeth." He can pile a movie on, without turning ironic or decorative. He opens and closes the story in Victorian England, but from the first shot of regimental braves playing very rough soccer, we can see that this movie is not just another parade of polished boots and trim epaulets.

Heath Ledger stars as Harry, who looks even better than most of the men in a scarlet Victorian uniform. Those bright uniforms are portents of coming blood, and yet the first shock is not from violence: Soon after engaging to marry the gorgeous officer's daughter Ethne (Kate Hudson, far away from "Almost Famous") and learning that the regiment is being dispatched to the Sudan for war, Harry loses his nerve and resigns.

### **STIGMA OF BANISHMENT**

All are stunned, notably his perfect-gent friend Jack (Wes Bentley, sort of a dull ramrod of virtue). And Ethne recoils. Four white feathers are sent to Harry, stigmas of disgust and banishment.

The regiment leaves. The engagement dissolves. Soon Harry will follow, and he must find his mates in the huge, cruel Sudan where a white man, in or out of a red uniform, makes a splendid target. The simple plot is how Harry catches up, tracking them across worse wastes than Lawrence of Arabia's, finding a noble and protective black friend (imposing Djimon Hounsou of "Amistad") and then charging on horse with the enemy to aid his comrades.

Simple, but not. The images often seem baked in a furnace, the faces (white and black) glowing out of shadows or against blinding dunes, the light often halo-fuzzing the figures. Kapur makes us feel the strain and torments, the courage and horror, including a massive slaughter akin to "Zulu" and a prison sequence like one of Goya's enclosed nightmares (hundreds of men crushed together, circling, agonized).

### **PAIN AND ENDURANCE**

The violence is robustly stylized yet seldom distanced. Piles of pale flesh — stripped Britishers — are stacked in the sun as carrion for dogs. The sense of the whites being proud, alien invaders too far from home and the cultural divide (men in prayer, Islamic and Christian, briefly contrasted) manage to rebuke colonialism without glibly touting nativism.

Ledger is interesting once he grows a beard, turns sunbaked and desperate. The movie is hurt a bit by having to circle back to England for romantic closure. While viewers may greet the ending and Hudson's smile, they seem softly ironic after the harsh engulfment of the Sudan.

"Four Feathers" has the reality of pain and endurance. It's macho without much hokum. Maybe it took a non-Euro such as Kapur (with writer Michael Schiffer) to reimagine the story this acutely, and to send the persistently intervening West a message about blundering boldly into foreign lands.

That Winston Churchill, who in the Sudan fought in the British Imperial Army's last cavalry charge, would surely have loved and hated the movie just about equally, is a token of Kapur's sizable achievement.

*David Elliot is the movie critic of The San Diego Union-Tribune. © 2002 by the Copley News Service.*