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**“The Lost City,”** directed by Andy Garcia. Crescent Drive Pictures, 2005, 143 minutes.

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# Lost Classic

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Gary Jason

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There are lousy movies, okay movies, and good movies. And then there are classics. In my view, a classic movie is one that works well on the three levels upon which movies can work: the philosophic, the literary, and the aesthetic.

The philosophic level is the level of ideas: does the movie ask questions and convey some substantive ideas about history, philosophy, political theory, or other intellectual matters? Classic movies instruct us. The literary level is the level of plot, character, and dramatic dialogue. Classic movies compel. Finally, the aesthetic level is that of specifically cinematic characteristics, most importantly cinematography, music scored for film, and acting. Classic movies entrance us.

To cite one example, David Lean’s “Lawrence of Arabia” is a classic. At the philosophic level, it addresses the nature of war, the attraction of war, and the logic of big power conflicts. At the literary level, the character study of T.E. Lawrence is brilliant, and the plot that develops it is arresting. At the aesthetic level, the cinematography is magnifi-

cent, with sweeping desert views and powerful scenes of warfare, accompanied by an incredible score and superb acting.

Last year a movie came out that I thought would be widely hailed as a new classic; but, for reasons I will discuss in a moment, it quickly disappeared from the few theaters that ran it. It is now available for rental or purchase, and if you didn’t see it during its brief theatrical run, do so now.

Andy Garcia directed and starred in the film, his tribute to his native city — Havana, Cuba. Based on a brilliant script by the Cuban novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante, the action takes place in Havana in 1958 and 1959, when the Batista regime was in its last days, and various democratic and revolutionary forces were contending.

In a literary device that nicely concentrates the drama and its various effects, the story is built around one family, the Felloves. The group is headed by a democratically inclined father, an esteemed professor who has three sons and two daughters-in-law. Andy Garcia plays the oldest brother, Fico, a nightclub owner and musician. Both younger brothers get caught up in the revolution. One joins Fidel and Che; the

other joins a smaller group, and is killed in an attack on Batista. His widow and Fico then fall in love — a literary device that allows us to see the results of the Castro revolution in microcosm, as it affects the two lovers (the device is reminiscent of the Bogart-Bergman ro-

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mance that forms the center of another classic, “Casablanca”). Garcia looked long for an actress to play the widow (who, personifying Cuba, eventually gets seduced by Fidel’s ideology), and he found the perfect one in the beautiful Spanish actress Ines Sastre.

But most impressive are the cinematography, a gift of love to a beautiful city and country, and the music, with Cuban dancing and singing given a central role throughout. The main cast gives an excellent performance, as does Bill Murray, a kind of comic Greek chorus, commenting upon the action taking place around Fico, and Dustin Hoffman, who plays the gangster Meyer Lansky, deeply involved in building gambling in Havana and paying off Batista.

At the time of this film’s release, I wondered why such an excellent movie wasn’t released more widely, and I suspect that it has to do with the dominant mindset in Hollywood. In this film, Fidel is portrayed as the totalitarian tyrant he is, and Che as the vicious thug he was — not as the hero seen in “The Motorcycle Diaries.” Hollywood is predominantly leftist, and still worships Fidel (who, we dare to hope, may soon finally die). I think of another David Lean classic, “Dr. Zhivago,” snubbed at Oscar time because of its frank portrayal of the evils of Russian Communism. □