The Lean Years

From *Summertime* in Venice to *Lawrence of Arabia* in the desert, David Lean was one of film’s greatest visual storytellers. Here’s a glimpse at how the magic happened.

ORDERED CHAOS: Lean (on crane) is the calm in the center of the desert storm as he orchestrates a cast of thousands and a few dozen camels on the set of *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).

(Above) Portrait of the artist as a young man in 1946 while filming *Great Expectations*. 
ON SCHEDULE: Lean seems pleased with Julie Christie’s performance as she emerges from a trolley during the filming of Doctor Zhivago (1965). The film was shot in Finland and Spain, filling in for pre-revolution Russia.

LIGHTS! ACTION!: The setup for an intimate scene in The Happy Breed (1944), Lean’s second film, based on a play by Noel Coward about life in Britain between the wars. The director is seated at the right.

TUNDRA TAKE: From the crane, the director leads a battalion of Russian soldiers in the middle of nowhere in a typical Lean composition from Doctor Zhivago.

ON THE BEACH: Lean demonstrates how he wants Sarah Miles to walk with her parasol in a scene from Ryan’s Daughter (1970), filmed on the Dingle Peninsula in western Ireland.

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Top) British Film Institute; (below) Photofest
THE POINT IS: Sir David explaining exactly what he wants to Dame Peggy Ashcroft (left) and Judy Davis in a crowd scene from A Passage to India (1984), filmed on location in India and at Shepperton Studios in England.

MARCHING ORDERS: Lean prepares a long tracking shot in the desert on Lawrence of Arabia. Almost all movement in the film goes from left to right because he wanted to emphasize that the story was a journey.

CIAO, KATARINA: Lean and Katharine Hepburn go over her pages before a take on Summertime, filmed on location in Venice (1955). The picture was Lean’s first filmed on an exotic foreign site.
MAD DOGS AND ENGLISHMEN:
Shooting in the heat of the Sri Lankan jungle, Lean (in box) directs a ragtag band of POWs during World War II in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957).

EYE TO EYE: The director made six films with Alec Guinness, here as the dogmatic Col. Nicholson in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. The film was another one of Lean’s intimate character studies told in epic proportions.

TOP OF THE WORLD: Lean (far left) and crew members survey the scene from atop the dome of St. Mark’s Basilica in Venice, overlooking St. Mark’s Square, during the filming of *Summertime*. 