

**VARIETY.com.**



## **Dean Spanley**

(New Zealand-U.K.)

By DENNIS HARVEY

A New Zealand Film Commission (New Zealand) presentation, in association with Screen East Content Investment Fund, Aramid Entertainment, Lip Synch Prods., of a Matthew Metcalfe/Atlantic Film Group (U.K.) production. (International sales: NZ Film, Wellington.) Produced by Metcalfe, Alan Harris. Executive producers, Finola Dwyer, David Parfitt, Simon Fawcett, Alan Sharp. Co-producer, Karl Zohrab.

Directed by Toa Fraser. Screenplay, Alan Sharp, based on the novel "My Talks With Dean Spanley" by Lord Dunsany.

Fisk Jr. - Jeremy Northam

Dean Spanley - Sam Neill

Wrather - Bryan Brown

Fisk Sr. - Peter O'Toole

Mrs. Brimley - Judy Parfitt

Swami Presh - Art Malik

It's a dog's past life in "Dean Spanley," an immaculately cast, nicely handled and wafer-thin slice of Brit period-dress whimsy. Pic reps an odd sophomore feature choice for New Zealander Toa Fraser, whose big-hearted Maori family drama "No. 2" should have made more waves internationally. This effort will likely travel further due to these names, and it does have its peculiar charms. But it's a talky, narrowly focused piece that feels like an after-dinner anecdote presented with the full ceremony of a formal meal. Pic will flit through theaters before finding more comfortable smallscreen berths.

In the Edwardian era, genteel Londoner Fisk Jr. (Jeremy Northam) resents his dreary obligation each Thursday: visiting his father, Fisk Sr. (Peter O'Toole), who refuses to acknowledge the tragic loss of his wife and other son, or indeed express any emotion beyond bullheadedness.

In an effort to find some diversion from their awkward companionship, the two end up at a swami's lecture on reincarnation. This proves singularly unilluminating. But it does provide an opportunity for the first of several chance encounters with Dean Spanley (Sam Neill), a peculiar, somewhat mysterious fellow who strongly piques Fisk Jr.'s curiosity.

Lured to dinner by Fisk Jr.'s promise of a rare liqueur, Spanley requires only a few sips before his stuffy conversation turns to something bizarre and fascinating — namely, his experiences in a prior life as a dog. These reminiscences are delivered with such detailed gusto they're hard to discount as delusional.

O'Toole, in fine form, thaws most agreeably upon realizing he may have re-established an old friendship. Bryan Brown strikes some comic sparks as an agreeably rough-edged wheeler-dealer; Judy Parfitt adds tart notes as the old man's exasperated but loyal housekeeper. Northam, onscreen and in voiceover narration, provides a gently reflective center amid more eccentric characters.

None is moreso than Spanley, whose gradually escalating expressions of hound-dog logic and enthusiasm are restrained, unpredictable and delightful.

Based on an obscure novel by late Anglo-Irish fantasy writer Lord Dunsany, Alan Sharp's screenplay is deft; ditto Fraser's helming. Yet the story remains so small that, despite the players' excellence, "Dean Spanley" almost feels too slight for its medium. As an hourlong (even half-hour) prestige BBC item, it would be a little gem; on the bigscreen, it's pleasant but stretched.

Modest rather than plush by period-pic standards, all tech contributions are solid.

Camera (color), Leon Narbey; editor, Chris Plummer; music, Don McGlashan; production designer, Andrew McAlpine; art directors, Ben Smith, Ashley Turner; set decorator, Barbara Herman-Skelding; costume designer, Odile Dicks-Mireaux; sound (Dolby Digital) Tony Dawe; assistant director, Stuart Renfrew. Reviewed at Toronto Film Festival (Special Presentations), Sept. 7, 2008. Running time: 100 MIN.

<http://tiff08.ca/filmsandschedules/films/deanspanley>

## **Dean Spanley**

Toa Fraser

Country: United Kingdom/New Zealand

Year: 2008

Language: English

Runtime: 100 minutes

Format: Colour/35mm

Rating: PG

Production Company: General Film Corporation/Atlantic Film Group

Executive Producer: Simon Fawcett, Finola Dwyer, David Parfitt, Alan Sharp

Producer: Alan Harris, Mathew Metcalfe

Screenplay: Alan Sharp, based on the novel My Talks With Dean Spanley by Lord Dunsany

Production Designer: Andrew McAlpine

Cinematographer: Leon Narbey

Editor: Chris Plummer

Sound: Tony Dawe

Music: Don McGlashan

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

Canadian Distributor: Alliance Films

International Sales Agent: NZ Film

### **PUBLIC SCREENINGS**

Saturday September 06 01:30PM ROY THOMSON HALL

Sunday September 07 12:30PM WINTER GARDEN THEATRE

Featuring a career-capping performance by Peter O'Toole and a magical mélange of fine wine, canines and eccentric behaviour, Dean Spanley is a rare

pleasure. Based on the book by Lord Dunsany and adapted for the screen by Alan Sharp, the film transports us to Edwardian England, with its elegant rooms, lavish costumes and surprising tolerance for the outlandish.

Young Fisk (Jeremy Northam) lives in thrall to his curmudgeonly father, Fisk Senior (deliciously played by O'Toole). As a gambit to entertain the old man, Fisk junior takes dad along to a lecture by a visiting swami all about the transmigration of souls. At the lecture, and then twice again the same day, Young Fisk spies the district's new clergyman, Dean Spanley (Sam Neill). Finagling an introduction, he becomes intrigued, first by the Dean's surprisingly open-minded views on reincarnation, then by his weakness for certain peculiar sensations. Hungarian Tokay wine produces the most remarkable shivers of pleasure in the Dean, and launches him into the strangest of reveries.

With the support of his resourceful friend Wrath (Bryan Brown), Young Fisk is able to procure a large quantity of the finest Tokay, and the two men continue to wine and dine (but mostly wine) the progressively stranger Dean. As the scent and taste of the wine take their effect, the Dean begins to reveal memories of his previous life – as a dog. He recalls the keen thrill of communicating with other dogs, his utter disdain for the feline race and the exquisite joy of serving his master.

It takes the finest comedic actors to pull off this material, and director Toa Fraser has assembled a cast of the first rank. Neill treads with grace between comic fantasy and real pathos, Northam brings a grounded curiosity to a pivotal role and O'Toole emerges as the soul of the film. Portraying a man who can see the end before him and his life's losses behind him with equal, painful clarity, O'Toole finds precisely the right note of knowing, hard-won wit.

Toa Fraser was born in Britain and graduated from the University of Auckland. He is a playwright and feature filmmaker. He co-wrote the screenplay for the film *River Queen* (05) and made his filmmaking debut with *No.2* (06). *Dean Spanley* (08) is his second feature film.