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July 1, 2022

DILLON ON FILM

Black Narcissus: My Favourite Powell and Pressburger Film

Sexually repressed nuns go insane in the Himalayas.



Black Narcissus (1947). Credit: General Film Distributors

That subheading may sound like shameless clickbait, but it's an accurate summary of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's 1947 masterpiece, which celebrates its 75th anniversary this year. Every serious cineaste has their favourite film from this legendary pair of British filmmakers: *A Matter of Life and Death* for some, *The Red Shoes* for others, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* and *I Know Where I'm Going* also crop up in such debates, as do a couple of Powell's solo projects; *The Thief of Bagdad* (for the young at heart), and *Peeping Tom* (for those with a penchant for controversy and darkly transgressive misunderstood horror masterpieces).

All the above are personal favourites, but my top Powell/Pressburger picture is *Black Narcissus*. Adapted from the novel by Rumer Godden, it concerns a convent of Anglican nuns, who have been invited by General Toda Rai (Esmond Knight) to try and establish a school and hospital in a run-down palace atop a Himalayan peak. The palace, formerly the home of an Indian Raja, was used as a harem by the General's father, and its walls are covered in erotic paintings.

Hints that the palace is haunted do not put off strong-willed Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr), but the place begins to affect her, nonetheless. The other nuns also begin to exhibit unusual behaviour; including Sister Phillipa (Flora Robson), who feels mysteriously compelled to plant flowers rather than vegetables in the garden, and Sister Honey (Jenny Laird), whose medical care for the local children ends in disaster. Most unsettlingly, Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron), develops a lustful obsession with the General's agent Mr Dean (David Farrar), and becomes jealous of Sister Clodagh's interactions with him.

Mr Dean warns Sister Clodagh against arrogantly trying to bring western practices and mindsets into a culture and environment she doesn't understand and is ill-equipped to handle. The repressed Sister Clodagh steadfastly refuses despite clear signs the nuns are in over their heads. They clash with Hindu locals, including the palace's caretaker, Angu Ayah (May Hallatt). Other incidents unsettle matters, including a burgeoning romance between the General's heir (Sabu) and wild-spirited girl Kanchi (Jean Simmons).



Sublime matte paintings. Credit: General Film Distributors

Is the altitude affecting the nuns? Something psychological? Supernatural? The rich air of magical realism so unique to the films of Powell and Pressburger is at its most memorable here. Their directorial prowess, accompanied by Jack Cardiff's eye-popping colour cinematography, is nothing less than astonishing. Remarkably, the film was shot entirely at Pinewood Studios, with a few shots at Leonardslee Gardens, West Sussex. After seeing the film for the first time, I was amazed to learn there had been no Himalayas location photography. The many vertiginous mountain landscapes were achieved via expertly rendered matte paintings (credited to W Percy Day).

Performances are all superb, ranging from the subtle (Kerr) to the knowingly overripe (Byron). Speaking of Byron, after Sister Ruth

threatens to leave the order, one key scene features Sister Clodagh taking out her Bible and reading, whilst opposite her, Sister Ruth takes out her lipstick. An electrifying silent clash of will ensues, amid an underlying sense of supernatural menace. Lingering ghosts influencing the living in the battle for Sister Ruth's soul.

At the same time, there's a deliberate touch of melodramatic absurdity. Towards the end, the psychodrama verges on parody of patriarchal fears concerning female sexual desire; a desire that threatens to tip into nymphomaniacal jealousy, madness, and murder. Events build to a genuinely frightening climax, with a last ten minutes as scary as anything in *The Exorcist*, despite the family-friendly rating. In fact, the version originally released in the US was censored quite substantially (including the aforementioned finale, and the complete removal of a key flashback sequence).

Eerie, enigmatic, and endlessly intriguing, *Black Narcissus* is one of the greatest films ever made. A vivid, powerfully atmospheric masterpiece from singular cinematic artists at the peak of their powers. It sizzles with erotic tension, oozes with opulent visual artistry, and stirs the soul like a dream. Besides being a gripping psychological drama, it's a serious meditation on colonial arrogance, and a fascinating take on isolation and sexual repression. The uninitiated should seek it out immediately, but don't confuse it with the recent BBC series; a remake as superfluous and destined to be forgotten as the TV miniseries remake of *Doctor Zhivago*. Just as David Lean's monumental take on that story remains definitive, so Powell and Pressburger's take on *Black Narcissus* will continue to stand the test of time.