



DREAM PALACE

Black Narcissus

Introduction by director Edgar Wright (Saturday 22 May screening only).

Powell and Pressburger's delirious melodrama is one of the most erotic films ever to emerge from British cinema, let alone in the repressed 1940s – it was released just two years after David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945), with its more typically 'British' story of desire denied.

Starting from a controversial novel by Rumer Godden – an Englishwoman living long-term in India – Powell and Pressburger fashioned a taut melodrama of unusually fierce passions and barely contained erotic tension. Although the script never directly challenged the strict standards of the censors, it hardly needs saying that the repressed desires of nuns was not a common – or safe – subject for a British film in 1947.

Deborah Kerr, in her third film for Powell and Pressburger (following *Contraband*, 1940, and *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, 1943), was nominally the star of the film, playing the emotionally detached Sister Superior, secretly tormented by memories of lost love. But it was an extraordinary performance from the barely-known Kathleen Byron as the deranged Sister Ruth which really stood out. Byron had played an angel in *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), but there was nothing in that role which suggested that she was capable of a performance of such furious intensity.

David Farrar took the role of the agent, Dean, full of macho swagger, and the catalyst for Sister Ruth's madness. It was the first of three parts for Powell and Pressburger, and anticipated his lusty, malevolent squire in *Gone to Earth* (1950). Among the supporting roles were Sabu, in his first work with Powell since *Thief of Bagdad* (1940), and an 18 year-old Jean Simmons, fresh from her success in *Great Expectations* (1946), as a native temptress.

In its depiction of young women torn between duty and passion, *Black Narcissus* has common elements with the Archers' next film *The Red Shoes* (1948), while its evocation of the mystical power of landscape and geography positions it in a line of Powell's work which includes *The Edge of the World* (1937), *'I Know Where I'm Going!'* (1944) and *A Canterbury Tale* (1945).

With the help of designer Alfred Junge and cinematographer Jack Cardiff – both rewarded with Oscars – Powell convincingly created a Himalayan convent on a Pinewood soundstage, lending the proceedings a tense, claustrophobic atmosphere. An oppressive jungle scene was filmed in a Sussex tropical garden.

Mark Duguid, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

Legendary writer-producer-directors Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger created a range of fantastical cinematic worlds, full of beauty and strangeness. In these worlds, the ambitions of dancers turn shoes into

magical possessions, crashed RAF pilots become ghosts fighting for their right to return to life, and simple journeys and pilgrimages face the invisible forces of folklore and the unique atmosphere of places.

With this in mind, watching their one-of-a-kind drama *Black Narcissus*, which was released in cinemas on 26 May 1947, raises some intriguing questions about the outlook of Britain in its period of production. Here, the world outside of Europe is treated, through a perceived exoticism, with a surreal otherness. This sits alongside a radical questioning of female sexual desire and repression, which unleashes a level of eroticism that's surprising for 1940s British cinema.

Black Narcissus charts the opening of a convent of nuns in the Himalayan mountains, following the enigmatic Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr) in particular. However, the pressure and isolation of the nuns' location leads to the convent's inevitable downfall, with one sister in particular, Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron), becoming literally possessed by her lust for a local Englishman, Mr Dean (David Farrar).

Amid this pressurised drama, Powell and Pressburger's film also follows many tangential narratives, dealing with cultural differences, blossoming smaller romances and the almost sentient presence of the landscape. This last element makes for an interesting starting point for detailing the film's main crux: how the exoticism of its location pushes the characters into their inner selves, but also how such landscapes – emphasised and exaggerated – can tell so much about the British psyche.

Although a large part of it was shot at Pinewood Studios, and at Leonardslee Gardens in Sussex, *Black Narcissus* is very much a landscape film. The Himalayan topography is a Technicolor dream – vibrant like the hidden fantasies of many of the characters. The dramatic shot of Sister Clodagh ringing the convent's bell in desperation summarises the film perfectly. In the matte painting of the mountain chasm (by the brilliant Walter Percy Day, with assistance from his sons, Arthur and Thomas), the gulf looks as though it could descend infinitely. But it's equally the precipice of Sister Clodagh's inner world. The world of her past passions is an emotional chasm that the landscape around forces her to confront – alongside Mr Dean's impossibly short shorts, of course.

The camera emphasises this gulf, highlighting the fantastical nature of the landscape and the inner female experience. It's incredibly fitting that this gulf eventually drags one character to their rocky doom.

Black Narcissus is, in many ways, radical for British cinema in the 1940s because of this daring exploration of the 'other' – the otherness of female desire (if only because of its lack of previous presentation) and the otherness of the world outside of western society. In this sense, the colonial aspect of the film is intriguing and far less typical in ideology for British cinema set in other countries, even with the white Jean Simmons playing a local person of colour.

The film pre-empted a movement that gradually came to the fore in more problematic ways in both western music and film in the following decade. In music, the likes of Les Baxter explored the colonial allure of the other, mixing western desires for erotic mood music with traditional instrumentation from Africa and the Middle East. Epic exotica cinema – Robert Pirosh’s *Valley of the Kings* (1954), Howard Hawks’ *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955) and Fritz Lang’s *The Tiger of Eschnapur* (1959) being three of many examples – had been a norm in Hollywood for some time (in fact it’s been a staple since the dawn of cinema), but the Technicolor years of the 1950s saw a boom of such films set in seemingly fantastical countries.

The increasing accessibility of flights abroad can in some way explain this. The jet-set generation required that their films matched their own increased potential to explore the globe by engaging in an equally increased level of mythmaking when portraying other countries.

So how does *Black Narcissus* sit within this trend? It could be argued that Powell and Pressburger’s film is far more nuanced in that it uses its own sense of amazement at the wider world to subvert and question the inner worlds of its characters rather than use them for simple, ‘othered’ storytelling.

This is the film’s radical draw. It explains why, on the whole, it has aged incredibly well. Unlike other films in this guise or genre, this story of interlopers arriving to ‘better’ the locals is overtly aware of the fallacy in such a journey. For the sisters of *Black Narcissus* know deep down that, in spite of their own good will in the long journey and fight to stay in the Himalayas, it is a foolish gesture.

After all, such exotic landscapes already exist within themselves. The repressed, undiscovered country of their own pleasures ultimately proves far more devastating than the unsettling backdrop of the mountain range, dreamt up from afar.

Adam Scovell, bfi.org.uk, May 2017

BLACK NARCISSUS

Directed by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
©: Independent Producers
Production Company: Archers Film Productions
Produced by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
Assistant Producer: George R. Busby
Assistant Director: Sydney S. Streeter
Written by: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger
Adapted from the novel by: Rumer Godden
Photographed in Technicolor by: Jack Cardiff
Colour Control: Natalie Kalmus
Associate: Joan Bridge
Process Shots: W. Percy Day
Editor: Reginald Mills
Production Designed by: Alfred Junge
Assistant Art Director: Arthur Lawson
Costumes: Hein Heckroth
Music/Sound Score Composed/Conducted by: Brian Easdale
With: The London Symphony Orchestra
Sound: Stanley Lambourne
Dubbing Mixer: Gordon K. McCallum
Studios: Pinewood Studios, D&P Studios

uncredited
2nd Assistant Director: Kenneth Rick
3rd Assistant Directors: Lawrence G. Knight, Robert Lynn
Continuity: Winifred Dyer
Assistant Continuity: Joanna Busby
Casting Director: Adele Raymond
Assistant Casting: Patrick MacDonnell
Crowd Casting: Jerry Dereham, Bill Hahn
Camera Operators: Christopher Challis, Ted Scaife, Stan Sayers
Focus Pullers: Ian Craig, Ronald Cross
Clapper Loaders: Herbert Salisbury, Michael Livesey
Technicolor Camera Assistant: Dick Allport
Lighting Electrician: Bill Wall
Chief Electrician: Harry Black
Colour Stills: George Cannon
Monochrome Stills: Max Rosher
Portrait Stills: Fred Daniels
Matte Artist: Peter Ellenshaw
Special Effects Camera: Douglas Hague
Foreground Miniatures: Jack Higgins
Synthetic Pictorial Effects: Syd Pearson

1st Assistant Editor: Seymour Logie
2nd Assistant Editors: Lee Doig, Noreen Ackland
Set Dresser: M.A.S. Pemberton
Scenic Artist: Ivor Beddoes
Art Department Trainee: R. Townsend
Indian Set Dresser: E. Harvison
Draughtsmen: Elliot Scott, Don Picton, William Kellner, J. Harman, G. Beattie, Alan Harris
Chief Construction Manager: Harold Batchelor
Dress Supervisor: Elizabeth Hennings
Wardrobe Mistress: Dorothy Edwards
Wardrobe Master: Bob Raynor
Make-up: George Blackler
Assistant Make-up: Ernie Gasser
Hairdresser: Biddy Chrystal
Assistant Hairdresser: June Robinson
Music Recording: Ted Drake
Chief Production Mixer: John Dennis
Boom Operator: George Paternoster
Boom Assistant: Mick Stolovich
Dubbing Editor: John Seabourne Jr
Indian Liaison Officer: Kenneth Perry
Horticultural Consultant: Giles Loder

Cast:
Deborah Kerr (*Sister Clodagh*)
Sabu (*Dilip Rai, the young general*)
David Farrar (*Mr Dean*)
Flora Robson (*Sister Philippa*)
Esmond Knight (*the old general*)
Jean Simmons (*Kanchi*)
Kathleen Byron (*Sister Ruth*)
Jenny Laird (*Sister ‘Honey’ Blanche*)
Judith Furse (*Sister Briony*)
May Hallatt (*Angu Ayah*)
Eddie Whaley Jr (*Joseph Anthony*)
Shaun Noble (*Con*)
Nancy Roberts (*Mother Dorothea*)
On Ley (*Phuba*)

UK 1947©
101 mins

In partnership with:



BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view. See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.