

## **Black Narcissus (1947) Powell & Pressburger**

P Michell 2014

This stunning visual film's intellectual content comes from a number of contributors – cinematographer, directors/producer/writers. The cast is great too – Kerr, Robson, Simmons, Byron are standouts. An excellent example of the collaborative concept of film making.

Visually the film 'borrows' heavily from the Dutch master artist - Vermeer.

Note the ending – last 12 mins of film. See below.

### **SYNOPSIS**

A group of nuns, headed by the young and inexperienced Sister Clodagh, is sent to an isolated region in the Himalayas to establish a convent with a school and a clinic. They occupy a palace handed over to them by a local General that once held the concubines of a previous owner. Sister Clodagh arrives with others picked by the Mother Superior to assist her: Sister Briony, picked for her strength; Sister Philippa, for her gardening skills; Sister Honey, the most popular nun in the order; and Sister Ruth, who is in poor health and requires a challenge. Barely able to communicate with the locals, the Sisters must rely almost entirely on the estate's manager, Mr. Dean, an Englishman "gone native." Sister Clodagh feels duty bound to take in such outsiders as Kanchi, an Indian girl turned away from her family, and the Young General, a flippant noble looking for an education. The challenges the nuns face run the gamut from the damaging effects of high altitude on their health to a populace set in its ways, encroaching memories of their past lives before taking their vows, and even madness.

Written, Produced and Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger

Adapted from the novel by Rumer Godden

Photography: Jack Cardiff

Music: Brian Easdale

Editor: Reginald Mills

Costumes: Hein Heckroth

Production design: Alfred Junge

Cast: Deborah Kerr (Sister Clodagh), David Farrar (Mr. Dean), Sabu (Dilip, the Young General), Flora Robson (Sister Philippa), Esmond Knight (The Old General), Jean Simmons (Kanchi), Kathleen Byron (Sister Ruth), Jenny Laird (Sister Honey), Judith Furse (Sister Briony), May Hallatt (Angu Ayah), Eddie Whaley, Jr. (Joseph Anthony), Shaun Noble (Con), Nancy Roberts (Mother Dorothea).

C-101m.

<http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/68909/Black-Narcissus/articles.html>

The prolific period of the Powell & Pressburger collaboration created arguably a high point of British Cinema in the 1940s and 1950s. They co-directed, wrote and

produced their own material. Much like Hitchcock (who didn't write) did. Interestingly some of Charlie Chaplin's best work came when he took on similar roles. A more recent example is Woody Allen.

Notable films by Powell & Pressburger - 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel (1941), One of Aircraft is Missing (1942), Stairway to Heaven (1946), Red Shoes (1948), Tales of Hoffman (1951), Oh ... Rosalinda (1955), Pursuit of Graf Spee AKA Battle of the River Plate (1956) [their most financially successful film and an exhilarating war film about the sinking of a German battleship].

The BFI did the first retrospective of their work in 1971. In 1978 a full retrospective was done. The book 'Powell, Pressburger and Others' by Ian Christie was published.

**Michael Powell** (1905-1990) co-director, -producer, -writer. Over 60 film scripts. Trivia – married to Thelma Schoonmaker (1984 – 1990) Scorsese's film editor. Scorsese introduced them.

Church of England – Grew up in Oxford

After Peeping Tom (1960) found it hard to get work. Rediscovered in 1970s.

Quotes:

*My master in film, Buñuel, [Luis Buñuel] was a far greater storyteller than I. It was just that in my films miracles occur on the screen.*

*Seventy years ago there were men like D.W. Griffith and seventy years later - now - there are not many men like Martin Scorsese. But so long as there is one there will be others, and the art of the cinema will survive.*

*I am the teller of the tale, not the creator of the story.*

**Emeric Pressburger** (1902-1988) – Hungarian Jew chased around Europe. Wrote over 70 film scripts. Emigrated to UK and became more 'English than the British'. An outsider looking in. One of his first jobs was a script-writer but he spoke no English! Learnt the language and its nuances and met Powell.

Quotes:

*The worst things that happened to me were the political consequences of events beyond my control ... the best things were exactly the same.*

*I think that a film should have a good story, a clear story, and it should have, if possible, something which is probably the most difficult thing - it should have a little bit of magic ... Magic being untouchable and very difficult to cast, you can't deal with it at all. You can only try to prepare some nests, hoping that a little bit of magic will slide into them.*

**Jack Cardiff** (1914 – 2009) (Cinematographer) 86 films. – ‘Painting with Film’ One of the greatest and prolific cinematographers whose wide ranging work includes: African Queen (1951) to Conan the Destroyer (1984) to Red Shoes (1948). Also - Tai Pan – TV Mini Series (1986), The Vikings (1958), Barefoot Contessa (1954), Prince and the Showgirl (1957), Sons and Lovers (1960), Death on the Nile (1978). (Young), Nigel Kennedy’s Vivaldi’s Four Seasons (1991). Prolific documentary work during the 1930s.

From the video – ‘Cameraman: The life and work of Jack Cardiff (2011):

... The most important person in the history of color cinematography is surely Jack Cardiff. ... Jack Cardiff’s career spans the entire history of motion pictures, from the silent era to today’s high definition technology. Cardiff started as a child actor in English silent films, and graduated to become a camera operator. Later, his career as a Technicolor cinematographer blossomed. You’ve heard of “painting with a camera”. Cardiff “painted with a camera”. Literally. He was a classic painter himself, studying and re-drawing Rembrandt and other artists. He mastered cinema “paint on glass”. His love of classical painting and color technology produced some of the richest, most strikingly beautiful films ever made. The real star of “Cameraman” is the glorious, fully-restored clips from “Black Narcissus”, “The Red Shoes”, “Pandora and the Flying Dutchman”, “The African Queen”, “The Magic Box”, “The Vikings”, and “The Barefoot Contessa”. An extended analysis of “Black Narcissus” reveals a powerful study about nuns converting a brothel into a chapel in Nepal. Striking outdoor sequences on windy mountain cliffs were shot, not on location, but in London at Pinewood Studios: Cardiff movie magic. In 1953, actor Errol Flynn hired Cardiff to direct “William Tell”, and constructed a Tyrolean village in Courmayeur, Italy, in the valley below Mont Blanc. Flynn invested most of his entire personal fortune(\$500,000) before the Italian backers ended funding. About 30 minutes of footage was completed, and the film was never released. The Alpine village set was torn down in 1979. Several brief color scenes remain, with Flynn in action. No sound-track has ever been found. More extensive scenes can be found in the 2005 documentary “Adventures of Errol Flynn”. Jack Cardiff received two Academy Awards: one in 1947 for Cinematography, and an honorary Oscar in 2001. Cardiff died on April 22, 2009, at the age of 94.

**Cinematography Trivia:**

A Technicolor corporation executive claimed that this film was the best example of the Technicolor process

The much admired Himalayan scenery was all created in the studio (with glass shots and hanging miniatures).

The backdrops were blown-up black and white photographs. The art department then gave them their breathtaking colors by using pastel chalks on top of them.

The great masters - Johannes Vermeer and Caravaggio has been referenced as an inspiration for the lighting and color palette. A tribute to Vermeer can be seen in the opening scene when the Mother Superior is reading a letter, while facing a window. An image often used by Vermeer.

### **Further Exploration:**

[www.powell-pressburger.org](http://www.powell-pressburger.org) - The Powell & Pressburger Pages on the Internet.

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2009/cteq/black-narcissus/>

[http://offscreen.com/view/holiness\\_in\\_black\\_narcissus](http://offscreen.com/view/holiness_in_black_narcissus)

If you really want to learn way more:

Filled with the joys of Open Access Week 2010, Film Studies For Free brings you a small but perfectly formed 'study of a single film' resource: a little list of openly accessible online articles on Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's 1947 film *Black Narcissus*:

<http://filmstudiesforfree.blogspot.com.au/2010/10/black-narcissus-colours-of-desire.html>

(Unfortunately many broken links.)

1995/6 Review:

Like Jean Renoir's *The River*, *Black Narcissus* is based on a novel by Rumer Godden, and marks the Archers' first film whose source material is not their own.

*Black Narcissus* is a vitally important film in the history of cinema for two main reasons. Firstly, Powell realised that the story itself was intimate and dramatic and could easily be swamped by exotic, majestic exteriors filmed in Nepal. He needed complete control over the atmosphere of the film, and the only way to do this was to shoot everything in a Pinewood studio, using matte shots, glass shots, etc. and a huge set of the palace with painted backings. The result was two Academy Awards for art direction and set decoration.

The second reason is that *Black Narcissus* marks Powell's first experimentation with the notion of composed film, which involved writing the music first and shooting the film to playback. The sequence lasts only 12 minutes, but it is the build-up to the climax of the film. In it the music (composed by Brian Easdale) dictates the movements of the characters and reveals their thoughts and intentions. As a result Powell creates a pulsating, scintillating film full of eroticism.

*Review by Stephen Cox Taken from EUFS Program 1995-96*