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BLACK NARCISSUS

MICHAEL POWELL

and

POWELL & PRESSBURGER

November 20, 1980 - January 5, 1981

Friday, December 26 (6:00)

Sunday, December 28 (2:30)

BLACK NARCISSUS. 1947. Great Britain. Produced, written and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger for The Archers Production Company. Based on a novel by Rumer Godden. Associate Producer: George R. Busby. Assistant Director: Sydney Streeter. Photography (Technicolor): Jack Cardiff. Camera Operator: Ted Scaife. Editor: Reginald Mills. Production Design: Alfred Junge. Costumes: Hein Heckroth. Music/Sound Score: Brain Easdale. Sound: Stanley Lambourne. (Janus Films) 100 minutes.

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

BLACK NARCISSUS inevitably fits in with Powell and Pressburger's recurring theme about withdrawal from the world, and misfits. Not having read the original novel I am not sure how faithfully the film reflects its spirit, but normally Powell and Pressburger were most passionate when dealing with their own, original material (as in A CANTERBURY TALE) and in their relatively few adaptations of the writings of others (as here, and with THE SMALL BACK ROOM) there was a tendency to stand back, and to concentrate on craftsmanship rather than on personal statements. Whether it reflects Rumer Godden's original approach, or possibly is muted because of a disagreement with it, BLACK NARCISSUS doesn't really have a specific point of view. Although one or two barbs are quite pointed--the nuns using such words as "warship" and "bayonet" to teach English to native children--the general anti-church attitude comes through more by implication than statement. Had Buñuel been at the helm, the results would obviously have been very different--stronger dramatically perhaps, and certainly in no doubt as to where it stood, but almost certainly less dynamic and less pleasing visually. In any case, one should hardly criticize a film for being unable to make up its mind, since ambiguity has always been a component of the Powell/Pressburger films. It may--or may not--extend here to the casting of Deborah Kerr and Kathleen Byron as the two most violently opposed nuns. Although both actresses project totally different things, their facial structure is so similar that one can't help wondering whether the intention was to aim at a two-faces-of-the-same-coin effect.

Notwithstanding the dramatic values of the film--the superb underplaying of the scene wherein Deborah Kerr confesses her weaknesses to David Farrar, and the genuine if bravura horror of the closing sequences--it is of course the pictorial values that matter most. So superbly do the Production Design of Alfred Junge and the camerawork of Jack Cardiff work together that even in black-and-white (as it was sometimes shown on American TV), the film is beauti-

ful. Of course here, in its original Technicolor, it is absolutely breathtaking. The sets, matte and glass shots, and the miniatures, by which the Indian mountain outpost is recreated in the British studios, are quite fantastic in their expertise. One knows, if only by the camera movements, that they have to be fake, yet they are thoroughly convincing in a cunningly stylized way. Even the few authentic mountain shots, photographed in India to be cut in as establishing scenes, have been muted and given the look of paintings so that they match perfectly with the studio reconstructions. And the green but never very lush English foliage has somehow been photographed in such a way as to give it the exotic, steamy look indicative of India.

Quite apart from its outstanding qualities as a film, BLACK NARCISSUS is interesting today as an example of the idiocies of American censorship some thirty years ago. When it was released here, the power of the Catholic Legion of Decency was at its peak, masquerading as "guidance", but in effect enforcing its own censorship on all audiences. Catholic or not, because of the power they wielded in not only keeping audiences away from specific films, but in boycotting thereafter the theaters that played them. Because of this, several films of the period were all but massacred, with Cocteau's L'ETERNEL RETOUR and BLACK NARCISSUS especially victimized. In its affected sequences, BLACK NARCISSUS was a mass of clips and splices. All of the flashback sequences were totally removed, since they raised the possibility that some nuns might recall the past wistfully, and question whether their choice had been the right one. The scenes wherein the defecting nun puts on silk stockings and lipstick were shorn of all the close-ups of those particular sins, and since the action took place in a virtual cell, lit only by a flickering candle, it was none too apparent what was going on. One cut created exactly the opposite effect of what was intended. The sequence in which the former nun attempts to seduce the British overseer, and is repudiated by him, had all of the repudiation removed! Thus it suggested that (a) the seduction took place, and (b) the nun's subsequent total madness was a direct consequence of it--which may well have been the editorializing effect the Legion wanted! Our print is of course of the full British version, and is unlikely to corrupt anyone, although it may possibly dissuade a few potential nuns.

All in all, BLACK NARCISSUS is one of the very best Powell and Pressburger films--a real mixed bag of drama, eroticism, whimsy and visual splendor, plus some really fine acting--but withal, an extremely disciplined mixed bag.

-- © William K. Everson

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Suggested reading: "Powell Pressburger and Others," edited by Ian Christie (British Film Institute, London, 1978). Available in MoMA Bookstore.