

The Main Feature



Issue Number 14 – 10th April 2008

The Painted Veil

12 Usa/2006/125mins

Cast: Naomi Watts, Edward Norton, Liev Schreiber, Toby Jones, Diana Rigg
Director: John Curran
Screenplay: Ron Nyswaner, based on the novel by W. Somerset Maugham
Cinematography: Stuart Dryburgh
Music: Alexandre Desplat
U.S. Distributor: Warner Independent



I have been looking forward to seeing *The Painted Veil* ever since I discovered that the country scenes were filmed in a remote Chinese village (Huang Yao) where I have stayed. My original plan was to borrow the book from the library, read it before watching the film tonight for the first time, and compare the two. Unfortunately, all the Surrey library copies of the book were already out on loan and there was a long waiting list. The librarian said that this usually meant that the book was being studied so maybe WNCC members have been doing what I had originally planned and you have all read the book beforehand. The result was that although I was unable to borrow the book, I was able to borrow a library copy of the film on DVD so tonight will be my second viewing. Unfortunately, the end of the film was ruined for me by one of the reviews I had read on the internet. I promise I won't do the same in these notes but to me it was similar to when a journalist gave away the ending of *The Mousetrap* on the grounds that it had been running so long that everyone in the country must know the identity of the murderer.

The Plot

The Painted Veil is based on the book of that name by W.H. Maugham. Set in the 1920s, the plot concerns a woman who marries for the wrong reasons - to escape her family - and then has to learn to love her husband with whom she has little in common.

Kitty, a gad-about-town girl accepts a proposal from somewhat dreary bacteriologist Walter Fane after a hint from her mother that her father can't support her forever. A dull sort of married life is in store until Walter decides to accept a job in colonial China. While there, Kitty succumbs to the charms of English Vice Consul, Charles Townsend and begins an affair but is discovered by her husband. As a punishment, Walter drags his unfaithful wife off into the interior to study a cholera epidemic that is raging in a remote village. To compound the misery, he extends the journey many days by travelling overland rather than a short trip by river. The only other Europeans in the area are nuns running an orphanage and British Deputy Commissioner Waddington who is trapped in situ by his job. Waddington can't believe that Walter has dragged his young, attractive wife to such a place and tells Kitty that when he heard she was coming, he was expecting 'a grim visaged old nurse with thick legs and a moustache'. As Walter sets about his work, Kitty has to find ways of filling her time and starts to help the nuns. She starts to see the caring side of Walter and the two are drawn together in a new understanding of each other.

The Film

This is the third attempt at putting the story onto the silver screen - Greta Garbo played Kitty Fane in 1934. Edward Norton spent several years trying to make the film a reality. A lot of that time was spent trying to persuade Naomi Watts to play Kitty who eventually agreed. As one

reviewer wrote, she's a lot less glamorous than Garbo but adds a modern material girl grit to Kitty's snub nose boredom with London life.

Apart from the location shooting in Huang Yao (acting as a village called Mei-tan-fu) much of the shooting took place in Beijing using 40 western and 260 Chinese crew plus translators. As can be imagined, the initial filming has been described as chaotic. Other scenes were shot in Shanghai which replaced the Hong Kong setting of the book and also doubled for London in the scenes set there. One of the 'stars' of the film must be the depiction of the beautiful, lush countryside by British Director of photography Stuart Dryburgh nominated for an oscar for his work on *The Piano*.

The Cast

Not being a fan of mainstream cinema, the cast of the film were unknown to me apart from Diana Rigg who plays the Mother Superior. Several friends who saw the film on its release told me they thought Edward Norton's performance was 'wooden'. Not being familiar with his acting record, I can only add that that is precisely the type of character he has to portray in the film, that of dull scientist mainly interested in his work.

Naomi Watts initially resisted playing the part as she was feeling burned out having recently appeared in the Ring films and King Kong. But perhaps it was 'in the stars' as it were for her to take the part as in a strange case of life imitating art, she is now engaged to Lieke Shriber who plays philanderer Charlie Townsend and has already born his son.

The Set

One of the advantages watching a film version of a novel on DVD as opposed to reading it, is that the DVD has additional features that can inform and add to the film content. In the interviews with the cast made during the shooting, Edward Norton commented that Huang Yao was used as the set for the cholera infested village because of its remoteness and that getting there had involved quite a few adventures. That was before I visited in late 2006. By then a new road was being constructed miles across country to provide access to Huang Yao. Nothing was allowed to stand in the way. Mountains were being blasted, rivers bridged and any obstructions moved. In Britain this would be the same as giving the remotest hamlet on Dartmoor its own link to the M5. Once the road is completed, Huang Yao will no longer be remote. It is officially designated by the Chinese authorities as an 'Ancient Town' where visitors have to pay to walk the ancient streets. As Deng Xiaoping said, 'To get rich is glorious' and it looks like the villagers of Huang Yao are taking his advice.

For Your Information

As several Members clearly enjoyed Jaques Tati, they may be interested to know that on Saturday 19 April at the Waterman's Art Centre, Brentford (www.watermans.org.uk), Jon Davis will be discussing the films of Monsieur Tati followed by a screening of Mr Hulot's Holiday (*Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*).

The discussion starts at 1pm with the film being screened at 2.30pm.

Tickets cost £7.50 and the box office can be contacted on 020 8232 1010.

Now on DVD these classic Jacques Tati films are available at just £12.99 each (usually £19.99 each):

There's the careering slapstick and rural charm of *JOUR DE FETE*, the elegant paean to the beach holiday *LES VACANCES DE MONSIEUR HULOT*, the satire of sterile modernity in *MON ONCLE*, and the magnificent *PLAYTIME*.

This offer is from The Guardian newspaper and you can place an order by calling 0870 836 0929 and quote GU10.

To order by post send a cheque to Guardian Readers Offer, PO Box 267, Letchworth Herts SG6 9BS with the details of the film(s) you wish to purchase and your name and address.

Reactions to

Belleville Rendezvous – 27th March 2008

Score 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Votes ~ ~ ~ 1 1 2 8 8 11 2 1

Total Votes - 34 Average Score – 6.97 Position in Season – 4th

Jour de Fete – 27th March 2008

Score 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Votes ~ ~ ~ 1 1 2 5 10 11 1 4

Total Votes - 35 Average Score – 7.26 Position in Season – 5th

Film	Score	Position
The Lives of Others	8.23	1 st
Little Miss Sunshine	7.886	2 nd
Notes on a Scandal	7.73	3 rd
Last King of Scotland	7.73	Joint 3 rd
Jour de Fete	7.26	4 th
Belleville Rendezvous	6.97	5 th
Pans Labyrinth	6.88	6 th
The Prestige	6.86	7 th
Offside	6.56	8 th
L'Enfant	6.37	9 th
Consequences of Love	6.24	10 th
Belle et la Bette	5.97	11 th
Black Cat, White Cat	5.74	12 th
The Day I became a Woman	5.72	13 th

Your views

General comments on both films:

Both good but with a little cutting would have been even better

Funny but rather too long

Fun

What a lovely evening - where else could we have seen 2 such amazing films

Belleville Rendezvous

Clever drawing - a bit too long

Well observed good prevailed but too long

Too long

A gem of a film; zany, inventive and innovative

Too long

Some great animation: the dog was the star

I enjoyed this more than I thought I would

Excellent - great animation and detail but a bit too long

Too long

Amazing but too long

Very funny and clever initially - too long

Loved the chase and the amazing detail - wonderful "old" ladies

Jour de Fete

I haven't laughed out loud so much for a long time

Funny but rather too long

Still good fun nearly 60 years on

Good

Superb

Splendid slapstick

Jacques Tati superb

Still a delight - Tati is an inspired clown

Slow and too long but very funny

Still fresh after 60 years - an age of innocence we shall not see again

A farcical French "Darling Buds of May"

Excellent

Nice to have some comedy

Oh to be a French postman on a bicycle

Next Time

24th April 2008 - Away from Her

A devoted couple must deal with the difficulties of sending her to a care home as Alzheimer's takes hold. A tender film with a stunning, Oscar and Bafta nominated performance from Julie Christie.

 Canada/2006/110 mins



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