



# Black Narcissus

## 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

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](http://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).

**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

35mm Nitrate (Wed 8 Nov), new 35mm BFI  
National Archive print screenings (Sun 22 Oct,  
Sun 12 Nov) and Digital (all other screenings)

**With introductions by:**

Thelma Schoonmaker (Wed 8 Nov)  
Mahesh Rao (Mon 20 Nov)

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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-empts 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](http://bfi.org.uk), May 2017