

THE PAINTED VEIL

US, 2007, John Curran



1925. Walter Fane is an English bacteriologist. He encounters a young woman in London, Kitty, courts her and marries her. She does not really love Walter and uses her marriage as an escape from her routine life.

Walter goes to Shanghai where Kitty begins an affair with a diplomat, Charles Townsend. Walter's reaction is severe and he demands that Kitty accompany him, as a punishment, to a remote village where there is a cholera epidemic and the risk of death. The trip is long and difficult.

A British deputy commissioner, Waddington, lives in the village. He co-habits with one of the local women. They befriend Walter and Kitty. Walter is busy with his work and his research and Kitty is left alone. The local Chinese general is opposed to the British presence but tolerates Walter and his attempts to help the people.

When Kitty encounters the nuns who live and work in the village, she is strongly influenced by the Mother Superior, listening to her story and her sound worldly-wise advice. Kitty begins to help the sisters with the sick. As a consequence, Walter sees her in a new light and she appreciates his work. They fall in love with each other. Kitty is pregnant but unsure of the paternity of her baby.

An influx of people into the village puts a strain on resources and on Walter. He contracts cholera and dies.

Some years later, in London, Kitty with her son, Walter, encounter Charles Townsend but she declines to continue any relationship with him.

A film for an adult audience that can be recommended both for its fine technical qualities and for its explorations of themes of infidelity, reconciliation, forgiveness and atonement.

W. Somerset Maugham created several strong female characters in his novels. There was Sadie Thompson in *Rain* (portrayed on screen by Gloria Swanson, Joan Crawford and Rita Hayworth) who, in isolated and tropical settings, tormented a man of God. There was the unfaithful Leslie Crosbie of *The Letter*, again in the tropics, (portrayed on screen by Jeanne Eagels, Bette Davis and Lee Remick). There was the unfaithful Mildred Rogers of *Of Human Bondage* (portrayed on screen by Bette Davis, Eleanor Parker and Kim Novak).

His Kitty Fane in *The Painted Veil* is a less forceful character than these – and she has been portrayed by Greta Garbo, Eleanor Parker and, now, Naomi Watts. However, she too is unfaithful but she has the opportunity to redeem herself – and be redeemed by her husband and his work among cholera victims.

This version of *The Painted Veil* was filmed in China. The cinematography of Shanghai and of the mountains and rivers of South China make a magnificent background to the plot. Alexandre Desplat's evocative score won a Golden Globe award.

The setting is 1925, China. Flashbacks build up the story of the western man and woman being carried through the countryside on chairs. He is a shy and rather uptight bacteriologist from England (Edward Norton most persuasive in the role) and his socialite and spoiled young wife, Kitty (Naomi Watts proving that she is an actress of skill and substance). We soon learn that she did not love her husband despite his devotion to her and has had a dalliance with a worthless diplomat (Liev Schreiber) in Shanghai. Her husband volunteers to



go to a remote village to help in a cholera epidemic and, quietly vengeful, forces his wife to accompany him.

The film develops the themes of colonialist presence in China and the growing resentment and violent protests as well as the themes of Chinese need for contemporary medical practice and hygiene. In the village are a group of French nuns who run an orphanage and who are helping in the crisis, many of them dying. Diana Rigg plays the superior, a practical and devout woman who delivers some very moving dialogue about her vocation, her love of God, her passion for God and how, as she has grown older, they are like an old married couple sitting together, taking each other for granted, a maturing up and down love.

The plot develops as might be expected, especially in the tense relationship between husband and wife, in the hard work of the doctor, in the passive aggression of the military chief who finally breaks through the rituals and pride of the local warlord to change the practices of the people concerning the dead which are contributing to the spread of the disease.

The end of the film is moving, showing that hard circumstances and shared self-giving can transcend bitterness and hurt and that love and forgiveness are not impossible.

Ron Nyswaner (Philadelphia) can be proud of the screenplay he has written and John Curran (Praise, We Don't Live Here Anymore) proud of the film he has directed.