

## Paradise Road

Steamy, sweaty, strained bodies amidst dung and dust set in a landscape of savage jungles and rice paddies, set among rickety dormitories, confinement cages and bamboo fences--thus has been the setting for filmic treatments of prisoners of war camps in South East Asia from *A Town Called Alice* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* to *The Deer Hunter* and *Empire of the Sun*. It is the setting also of *Paradise Road*, the new POW picture debuting in Washington.

As distinct from almost all of these other motion pictures, the internees in this World War II prison camp are all women and children, which gives a new shape to old conflicts. Writer-director Bruce Beresford (*Breaker Morant*, *Tender Mercies*, *Driving Miss Daisy*) has based his story on real incidents in the lives of the thousands of European and Australian women who were held in such Japanese camps in the Far East. It offers him the chance to show off a fine ensemble of acting talent --and these actresses make the most of it.

The film--like war itself--proceeds in episodes of slackness and shock. The first shock comes when a languid party at the fabled Raffles Hotel in Singapore (in February 1942) is broken up by an evacuation order for the women and children. The women of the colony escape by ship, but a second shock intervenes--their vessel is attacked and sunk by Japanese Zeros. As we follow three stalwart survivors on to a lush island--shock again, as they are harshly captured and brought together with some 400 other women into a ramshackle internment camp. So it goes throughout the rest of the movie, as the women struggle to survive amid appalling conditions for the remainder of the war.

One thing relieves their grueling tedium: their mounting of a vocal orchestra, i.e., a chorus which hums pure tones to mimic an orchestral sound. Though frowned upon by the Japanese jailers, the music--led by the redoubtable ex-socialite Adrienne Pargiter (Glenn Close) and the old maid missionary teacher Miss Drummond (Pauline Collins)--eventually captures the latter, eager as the women themselves to savor a snatch of beauty within the jungle wilderness. The music they make gets them through their trial, which ends, poignantly, simply, when the Japanese shamefully abandon their camp in August 1945.

Besides Adrienne and Miss Drummond, the story introduces us to a range of figures: the coming-of-age Aussie nurse Susan Macarthy (Cate Blanchett), the wiseacre American Topsy Merritt (Julianna Margulies), the winsome English newlywed Rosemary Leighton-Jones (Jennifer Ehle), the tough Dutch nun Sister Wilhelminia (Joanna Ter Steege), the sardonic German Dr. Verstak (Frances McDormand), the classic imperialist dame Mrs. Roberts (Elizabeth Spriggs), and many others. Not to mention an effective cast of Japanese jailers led by Colonel Tanaka (Sib Shimono) and a severe sergeant known as the "Snake" (Clyde Kusatsu). This is ensemble acting with a vengeance, and Beresford and his large cast pull most of it off.

All of these actresses must place makeup and glamour aside to make these camp denizens come alive. Glenn Close leads the league with her portrayal of an Adrienne who, with ravaged features, shredded dress, and shaven head, still triumphs through her bruises when she leads her vocal orchestra through the "Largo" from

Dvorak's New World Symphony. Pauline Collins (who made her name as *Shirley Valentine*) is a prim yet pungent presence who makes you believe she can't help forgiving her enemies. Cate Blanchett, in her first feature film as nurse Susan, is wonderful; you discover along with her a burgeoning confidence and maturity. The star of TV's recent "Pride and Prejudice" series, Jennifer Ehle is all sweetness and good sense, which makes her demise all the more affecting. Frances McDormand does an adequate turn as Dr. Verstak, though the Marlene Dietrich accent jars a bit (why didn't Beresford just use a German actress?). Julianna Margulies (of TV's "ER") sounds a sour note in this company; she seems to serve no other purpose than to launch the occasional cynical wisecrack. The Asian actors do a creditable job, too, being called upon to have somewhat richer personae than is typical in this kind of movie.

Beresford's script, which skirts cliché here and there, manages almost always to avoid it. In one instance, it is hinted that one character, Mrs. Tippler (Pamela Rabe), will be the standard turncoat/spy, but she only turns out to be a grouch. In another, sweet Rosemary sees her beloved husband in captivity, suggesting they are in for an inevitable reunion; but it is *not* inevitable, and they never meet again.

Filmed in Malaysia and Northern Australia, *Paradise Road* has a most authentic look and flavor. The music, especially the vocal orchestra, is moving; you can understand why its accomplishment brings the women out of their stockade stupor.

The triumph of the women in *Paradise Road* is no mere triumphalism; there is no grand breakthrough or victory; there is no fierce payback for their Japanese enemies. Their triumph is in their survival, and we in the audience survive their ordeal along with them.

*("Paradise Road" is rated "R" for raw realism and nudity in a brief shower scene.)*

(May 1997)