

55th Sydney Film Festival—Part 6

Deborah Kerr: an actor with genuine subtlety and integrity

Richard Phillips
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This is the last in a series of articles on the 2008 Sydney Film Festival. Part 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 appeared on September 16, 17, 18, 19 and 22 respectively.

When actress Deborah Kerr died in October last year, aged 86, after a long battle with Parkinson's Disease, her passing was noted. Newsreaders' remarks were supplemented with a few seconds from her better-known roles—the celebrated beach scene with Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity* and with Yul Brynner in *The King and I*. Twenty-four hours later the television news cycle had moved on and, apart from some respectful newspaper obituaries, all mention of this thoughtful and versatile actress had disappeared from the mainstream media.

One of the valuable and particularly enjoyable aspects of this year's Sydney Film Festival, therefore, was its Deborah Kerr eight-movie retrospective—a tiny selection from the 47 features in which the actress appeared during her almost 30-year film career. They included *Love on the Dole* (1941), *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), *Black Narcissus* (1947), *From Here to Eternity* (1953), *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), *An Affair to Remember* (1957), *The Sundowners* (1960) and *The Innocents* (1961).

Kerr worked with many leading American and British directors—Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, Jack Clayton, Alexander Korda, George Cukor, Vincente Minnelli, Otto Preminger, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Fred Zinnemann and John Huston, to name a few. She was the last of a generation of British actors that successfully, and with artistic dignity, made a valuable contribution to some of post-WWII America's more intelligent and sensitive films.

For much of her early movie career in the US, Deborah Kerr was presented as the archetypical “English rose”—beautiful and serene, strong yet reserved—characterisations that both amused and irritated her. She was, in fact, not English, but born in Scotland in 1921, the daughter of a naval architect.

Kerr was interested in theatre and performing from an early age, and after her family moved to Bristol, in England, she attended a drama school run by her aunt. The young girl read children's stories for BBC radio, won a scholarship to the Sadler's Wells ballet school, and at age 17 made her professional dancing debut in the ballet *Prometheus*.

Kerr moved on to drama, appearing in various Shakespeare productions, where she was noticed by film director Robert Atkins and talent scout John Gliddon, who offered her a film contract in 1939. Film director Michael Powell hired her for *Contraband* (1940) and, although her small part in the movie was edited out, she appeared in two films in 1941—*Major Barbara*, a George Bernard Shaw play directed by Gabriel Pascal, and *Love on the Dole*, directed by John Baxter.

Love on the Dole, which was based on a popular book and play, is set in the Lancashire industrial town of Salford in the early 1930s. Walter

Greenwood, who wrote the book, said that he was “burning up inside with fury at the poverty” in Salford and wanted to show “the tragedy of a lost generation”. British authorities, in fact, regarded the play as “dangerous” and the censorship board prevented it from being made into a film until 1941.

The movie candidly deals with the Great Depression, centring on the plight of the Hardcastle family suddenly hit by unemployment and thrown into poverty. Sally Hardcastle (Deborah Kerr) and her brother Harry (Geoffrey Hibbert) attempt to overcome the hard times that have befallen their family, but in the process become deeply estranged from their parents.

One of the movie's key characters is Larry (Clifford Evans), a left-wing militant who denounces the profit system. Sally, who works in a mill, falls in love with him, but he is seriously injured when police attack a miners' demonstration, and he dies soon after. The beautiful young woman also attracts the attention of a local gangster. After some resistance she decides to become his live-in partner in the hope that his money might help her parents and troubled brother, and provide her with an escape from the grinding poverty.

While the movie is often stiff, it is a heartfelt work and had a big impact on British audiences. Kerr is perhaps a bit too wistful as the young working class woman, but her performance assured her a role in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), a movie now regarded by many critics and filmmakers as a masterpiece.

The war years

The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp deals with the complex but enduring friendship of British and German military officers—Clive Candy (Roger Livesy) and Theo Kretschmar-Schuldorff (Anton Walbrook)—which spans the Boer War, WWI, the rise of German fascism and WWII. Kerr plays three parts in the film—Edith Hunter, Barbara Wynne and Johnny Cannon—women whom Clive Candy, at different stages in his life, regards as his ideal.

The 163-minute novelistic movie opens in 1943, during WWII, and moves via extended flashback from 1903 through to 1943. Its overarching message is that genuine friendship and loyalty will overcome the trials of jingoism, fascism and war. Livesy, Walbrook and Kerr are equally convincing in this humane and beautifully photographed movie, which poked fun at the British military elite.

The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp, Powell later wrote, “was a 100

percent British film but it's photographed by a Frenchman, it's written by a Hungarian, the musical score is by a German Jew, the director was English, the man who did the costumes was a Czech; in other words, it was the kind of film that I've always worked on with a mixed crew of every nationality and no frontiers of any kind." This level of international collaboration is taken for granted today, but in 1943 recognition of its artistic significance was uncommon and no doubt helped inspire and animate Kerr's performance.

Some British critics denounced the film, claiming that it was impermissible to undermine the reputation of the British officer corps and to present a German officer in such favourable light. Britain's *Daily Mail* was outraged, declaring: "To depict British officers as stupid, complacent, self-satisfied and ridiculous may be legitimate comedy in peacetimes, but it is disastrously bad propaganda in times of war ... In such times as these, when the respect and confidence of other countries are of vital importance to us, we cannot afford to put out a burlesque figure like this Colonel Blimp to go round the world."

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill initially tried to stop production of the film and, after attending its premier in June 1943, slapped an export ban on it. When the movie was finally screened in the US in 1945, the original version had been drastically cut.

Black Narcissus

In the last years of the war, Kerr toured Europe with the British Army's entertainment service and appeared in two more films—*Perfect Strangers* and *I See a Dark Stranger*. Her next major role was in another Powell and Pressburger movie, *Black Narcissus*, about young Anglican nuns sent to an abandoned palace and former harem in the Himalayas. Under the leadership of Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr), their task is to transform the ramshackle, windswept building on the edge of a cliff into a school and hospital.

The harsh and unfamiliar environment and the relatively uninhibited sexuality of the local inhabitants raise all sorts of questions for the nuns. They also bring the women into contact with Mr Dean (David Farrar), a handsome English local district agent.

Sister Clodagh, who is wrestling with the memories of her former life and loves in Ireland, is attracted to Dean. While their relationship is platonic, Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron) becomes deeply jealous, goes mad and dies in violent circumstances. The missionary project, as predicted by Dean, fails and *Black Narcissus* ends with the nuns leaving the Himalayas.

Sixty years on, much of the film's melodrama has dated—Sister Ruth's descent into madness is rather histrionic—but Kerr's performance is striking. She captures the quiet determination and repressed inner doubts of Clodagh and gives an emotional edge to the lush, almost surreal visuals of the studio-based production. Powell and Pressburger, in fact, were attempting to use the rich saturated colours of the relatively new technicolour process to highlight the emotions of their movies' characters.

Following agitation from America's Catholic Legion of Decency, all the flashbacks of Sister Clodagh's life before she became a nun were excised from the US version of the movie. Even with these cuts, the movie is no advertisement for religious celibacy or a monastic existence.

Hollywood calls

Following *Black Narcissus*'s release in 1947, Kerr moved to the US to

broaden her acting experience in movies with Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy and other Hollywood stars. Ten features followed in quick succession, including *The Hucksters* (1947), *Edward My Son* (1949), *King Solomon's Mines* (1950), *Quo Vadis* (1951) and *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1952).

It appeared, though, that Kerr was destined to be typecast in "tiara roles" and become Hollywood's version of an educated and rather proper post-WWII British woman. As she later admitted: "I came over here [Hollywood] to act, but it turned out all I had to do was to be high-minded, long suffering, white-gloved and decorative."

A chance to appear as Karen Holmes, the promiscuous wife of a US Army officer in *From Here to Eternity*, finally provided Kerr with the opportunity to break out of this framework. Directed by Fred Zinnemann and based on James Jones's novel of the same name, the movie is set on a US Army base in Hawaii just before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Its central characters are Captain Dana Holmes (Philip Ober), First Sergeant Milt Warden (Burt Lancaster), former boxer Private Robert Prewitt (Montgomery Clift), Private Angelo Maggio (Frank Sinatra), Karen Holmes (Deborah Kerr) and Lorene Burke (Donna Reed).

The movie mainly centres on Prewitt and Maggio and their conflict with local army officers, but Warden's affair with Holmes's neglected wife Karen is the more dramatically effective element in the story. Karen Holmes wants Warden to apply for officer training so that she can divorce her selfish and unpleasant husband. Warden opposes the way some officers physically and psychologically bully their soldiers—Prewitt and Maggio in particular—and does not want to be an officer. When he finally admits this to Karen she ends their affair.

Zinnemann's movie was acclaimed and won eight Academy Awards, including best director and best picture. Much of the critical praise for the movie is, in my opinion, exaggerated—too much of Jones's novel is lost in translation and Sinatra's performance is not persuasive. But revisiting it again during the festival, the movie certainly captures the hot-house and dehumanising character of military base life. The doomed affair between Warden and Holmes has real electricity.

Kerr was nominated for an Academy Award for her performance and, although the Oscars were given to Frank Sinatra and Donna Reed, it seemed that her skills were finally being acknowledged and would lead to more complex roles.

Kerr's next two films—*The Proud and the Profane* and *The King and I*, a Rogers and Hammerstein musical about an English governess to the children of the King of Siam (Yul Brynner)—were, however, unchallenging.

Adapted from a Broadway show, *The King and I* was a massive financial success for Hollywood and remains one of the most popular musical movies ever made. Notwithstanding the accolades, Kerr was not exactly enamoured with the film and told the *Chicago Tribune* some years later: "I'd rather drop dead in my tracks one day than end up in a wheelchair in some nursing home watching interminable replays of *The King and I*."

Her next major films were more interesting—*The End of the Affair* (1955), a Graham Greene story directed by Edward Dmytryk about a repressed wife who becomes involved in a complex extra-marital affair, and *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), directed by Vincente Minnelli.

Tea and Sympathy, which was screened at the Sydney Film Festival, explores the relationship between Laura Reynolds (Deborah Kerr), the wife of an American university lecturer, and one of her husband's students. The movie explores the young student's sexual insecurities and his inability to fit in with the other male students and the prevailing fraternity house backwardness.

Kerr's character is a sympathetic figure—no longer able to connect emotionally with her husband and sensitive to the social difficulties of the young male. As one critic noted—Kerr's strength as an actress was her ability to "make serenity dramatic"—and this dominates her performance.

Tea and Sympathy delicately tiptoes around the issue of homosexuality, an obvious subtext of the movie, but in doing so reveals something about the claustrophobic atmosphere of its times: Cold War McCarthyism combined with economic stability for much of Middle America.

Referring to her role in the film, Kerr later commented: “I suppose the part nearest me is Laura Reynolds in *Tea and Sympathy*... It was the coming together of a part and an actress—the same attitude to life, certain shyness in life and a deep compassion for people who are being persecuted for anything.”

In 1957 Kerr starred in John Huston’s comedy, *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, and then the syrupy but sincere Hollywood romance, *An Affair to Remember* with Cary Grant. While both movies won critical praise and commercial success, they are not profound. By contrast, *The Sundowners* (1960), directed by Fred Zinnemann, and *The Innocents* (1961), directed by Jack Clayton, which both screened at the Sydney Film Festival, are exceptional films and amongst Kerr’s best work.

The Sundowners stars Robert Mitchum as an Australian sheep drover, with Kerr as his wife. The movie, which also stars Peter Ustinov, tells the story of the trials and tribulations of the poor rural family. Kerr plays against type as the practically-minded, working class woman of the Australian outback. Her convincing body language and sure-footed ability to inhabit her character are exceptional.

The Innocents is an excellent adaptation by Truman Capote of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* and another example of Kerr’s subtlety and versatility. Set in Victorian England, Kerr is Miss Giddens, a governess hired by a wealthy playboy (Michael Redgrave) to take care of two young orphaned relatives. The children live at a country estate, which Giddens eventually believes is haunted by a former governess and her cruel lover. The beautiful children appear to be involved in a conspiracy against Giddens, who is increasingly unable to cope and becomes insane. Brilliantly shot in black and white, *The Innocents* has comparatively few night scenes and yet it is macabre and chilling, one of the great English-language movies of the early 1960s. Kerr’s performance is restrained, taught and unsettling in equal measure.

As the decade played out, fewer decent movie roles became available to Kerr. Her parts in *The Chalk Garden* and John Huston’s *The Night of the Iguana* (1964) were worthwhile but limited. These were followed by lightweight fare, such as *Marriage on the Rocks* (1965), *Casino Royale* (1967) and the rather silly *Prudence and the Pill* (1968).

Kerr’s last American movie, *The Arrangement* (1969), written and directed by Elia Kazan, was not well received and she decided to quit making films. The major Hollywood studios, moreover, had little interest in developing complex roles for middle-aged actresses such as Kerr. Their principal concern was, and still is, glamour and celebrity—reliable factors, their financiers argue, in generating profit.

Kerr continued working in theatre in the US, the UK and Europe, with occasional television parts and a final starring role in the film *The Assam Garden* (1985) as an Indian tea-planter’s lonely widow living in Surrey, England.

Although nominated for an Oscar on six separate occasions—*Edward, My Son* (1949), *From Here to Eternity* (1953), *The King and I* (1956), *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957), *Separate Tables* (1958) and *The Sundowners* (1960)—Kerr never received an Academy Award for acting. In 1994, she was given an honorary Oscar and rightly recognised for the “perfection, discipline and elegance” of her screen work.

It was suggested when Kerr quit making movies that she did so because of concerns about increasing violence and explicit sexual content in American cinema. In 1973, however, she explained that her principal reason was because there had been “big changes” in the movie industry, which “had become a sort of money making machine out of the worst part of our selves and our lives. I hadn’t wanted to be a part of that”. It is not hard to imagine Kerr’s attitude to the subsequent evolution of the movie

industry and its preoccupations today.

Concluded



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