

Review of *The Waiting City* (Director & Writer: Claire McCarthy; Hopscotch Films)

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Two clueless Australians travel to Calcutta to collect a little girl they have adopted. The husband Ben (Joel Edgerton), a musician who has learnt the hard way about drugs and depression, is quicker to take to the situation in which they find themselves. It is much harder for his wife Fiona (Radha Mitchell), an ambitious lawyer who is about to “make partner”. She wears the standard-issue hard porcelain mask she has acquired in her career, but behind it she is increasingly at sea.

They finally pick their way through the bureaucratic maze surrounding the adoption to meet their new baby in one of Mother Teresa’s homes. But it turns out that their daughter Lakshmi is very sick. As her condition deteriorates Fiona wants to take her back to Australia and to receive better medical attention. It is pretty clear to everyone in the audience that Lakshmi is too sick to go anywhere, let alone endure a 15 hour flight to Sydney. But Fiona does not see this.

She does not see a lot of things, but that begins to change at this point in the film. She tells one of Mother Teresa’s sisters what she wants to do, and her reply takes you immediately to the heart of this beautiful film: “you must always act from love, not need or desperation.” How two needy and desperate people finally learn to act from love rather than from their own desperation is what *The Waiting City* is all about.

Many people will find this a confronting film. *The Waiting City* is not just another offering in a long line of films about jaundiced Westerners being re-awoken by travel to the mysterious east. It might be possible to reduce the film to this if you are really determined to avoid what it is saying, but Claire McCarthy, the film’s director and writer and a student of Flannery O’Connor, is not going to help you do so.

This is a very serious film, executed with the lightest touch. It is also very beautiful. It takes you into one couple’s stalled relationship, and through it into the way we make things so hard for ourselves out of confusion and creeping hardness of heart. The gentleness and good humour with which it is done make it easy not to realise just how deeply this film takes you.

Fiona is the central character. You immediately recognise the type of modern woman she is; career-focussed, determined, in control, hardened. Some people will be distracted by the character-type Fiona represents, but this would be a mistake. Working women are not being criticised, anymore than mothers are being idealised. Claire McCarthy’s focus is much bigger than this.

Ben and Fiona’s marriage is one where the “me-ness” has completely gotten in the road of the “us-ness”. They are very different personalities. Ben is passive and Fiona is driven, and these dispositions reinforce each other. The more passive Ben becomes, the more driven Fiona becomes, which makes Ben more passive and Fiona more driven and puts the two of

them further and further apart. Like many modern couples, an insistent separateness constantly confounds the longing for closeness and togetherness.

The journey to India begins to break this cycle. It is Fiona who has to travel the furthest distance, but Ben has to make the trip too. His decision to relinquish passivity and to challenge Fiona to re-engage is the critical catalyst for the renewal of their marriage, and is depicted in the film in a very understated and deft way. Ben's decision to come back to life makes it safe for Fiona to start thinking about doing the same.

It is a hard road for Fiona, and part of the beauty of how McCarthy tells her story lies in the way that we begin to discover and even like the personality of a character who at the beginning is not very likeable. One of the issues she has to confront is her infertility, caused perhaps by the abortion she had when Ben was crippled by depression. McCarthy's handling of this is marked by moral realism and compassion, and all the more powerful because it is done quietly.

McCarthy's India is full of life. Samrat Chakrabati plays Krishna, the couple's guide, and is the third star of the show. His hospitality and frankness plays a big part in helping Fiona to open herself to what is happening and to the revival of her marriage. At one point Krishna tells Fiona maladroitly that she is "a barren woman" and should pray for help. This is probably one of the most confronting things that can be said to a Western career woman, but it is a marker of how much ground Fiona has covered that she finally accepts Krishna's suggestion.

Sex scenes seem to be unavoidable in contemporary films, but the one such scene in this film is very different. It opens with the camera catching Ben and Fiona's wedding bands and underscores the movement that has begun in them towards abandonment of self and openness to the other.

Claire McCarthy and her team have achieved something masterful and serene in *The Waiting City*. It is no wonder that some of Australia's best reviewers have rated it so highly, even describing it as one of the best Australian films of recent years. It combines great artistic accomplishment with a deep religious sensibility, in a way that speaks to believers and non-believers alike. Our culture has become very artful in resisting the call to transcendence. *The Waiting City* shows us what becomes possible when we decide to open ourselves to it.

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