

Film Close-Up: Naomi Watts

by Joey Berlin

"The Painted Veil" is a globe-trotting, 1920s romantic drama set in a mountainous Chinese landscape of mythic beauty. But to its star, 38-year-old Naomi Watts, the film is special in another way. It is the movie where she met her boyfriend, actor Liev Schreiber, although his role is small.

NAOMI WATTS - Naomi Watts plays Kitty Fane in the drama 'The Painted Veil.' CNS Photo courtesy of Glen Wilson. In "The Painted Veil," Watts is a spoiled, rich London girl cheating on her doctor husband, played by Ed Norton. In revenge, he drags her to a remote village in China, where he is spearheading the effort to battle a deadly disease outbreak. In the screenplay, adapted from W. Somerset Maugham's novel, the bitter couple slowly comes together amid the turmoil of a Communist power struggle.

Born in England and raised in Australia, Watts has appeared in films for 20 years, starting with her debut in "For Love Alone." But it took 15 years before she became an overnight sensation, with her performance in David Lynch's "Mulholland Dr." Starring roles in box office hits including "The Ring" and "King Kong" soon followed.

Q: Your character in "The Painted Veil" does things that you know the audience is going to dislike. How do you tell how far you can push the audience away, and still be able to reel them back in later?

A: Yes, well, you just have to commit to those moments, and all those beats were important. If you fall into the trap of thinking, "Oh, I must dilute this because the audience will lose interest in me, or my character," then that's death. What was so great about this character was her transformation.

And yeah, she was irritating, self-obsessed and frivolous, but I kind of enjoyed that, you know? I enjoyed that she was caught up in that world of who's who and how one looks. It's not that she was a bad person, ever. It's just, that's the world she knew and she didn't get a chance to look into anything deeper than that. And then this crisis forces her into that process.

Q: Is it true that you were pushing this film off because you were exhausted after filming "King Kong"? What made you finally believe it was a role you had to take?

A: No! That's not quite accurate. I don't know who wrote that in the production notes but I will be speaking to them, ha ha. No, I was attached to this project for three or four years, and never lost any passion for it or belief in it.

In fact, sometimes that's not the way things go when you've been attached to something for that long. But in this case, I always believed in it.

Q: So what happened?

A: What happened was, I came off of "King Kong," which was an eight-month shoot. I don't know if you've seen the film but it was physically intensive. It wasn't that I didn't want to do this project. I didn't want to work ever again, ha ha! I didn't know that my body could actually move from one film set right to another. So that's where I just thought, "Oh, can we hold off? Can you give me a chance to breathe?" And suddenly all the other elements were finally in place and they had to go, now.

Yes, maybe it took some inspiring and maybe coercion - and it did - but once I was there, it was the right thing to do. And then I got my year off afterward.

Q: After all those years of being attached to this film, you needed some last-minute coercion to go do it?

A: The week before, I try to get out of every film, ha ha. I think it's fear. It is. And it's so weird, because I'm so convinced at the time that I can't do it and I must get out of it. And, like clockwork, I do that with every project I end up doing.

Q: You definitely seem attracted to these darker kinds of roles. It is surprising that you have not yet gone for something lighter.

A: Yeah, I know. I try. I try to look for something light. Certain genres don't interest me, you know, like the romantic comedy genre. I mean, I don't know. Maybe just the good ones don't come to me because I'm not exactly the go-to girl for the laugh factor, let's face it. But, yeah, I find the darker stuff fun. It never ceases to interest me. And if it's based in truth, that's what gets me going, whereas a romantic comedy doesn't seem to ever be based in anything truthful.

Q: That sounds like the fear factor again. You would probably be good.

A: Do you think? Well, maybe, yeah. I definitely can admit I've had a lot of fear about comedy. Back in the days where I was running around town auditioning for things, some of those things were sitcoms. I was told repeatedly that I was not funny, heh.

So you tend to believe, when you're not in your best place, what anyone says. But no, the comedy that I like is more the obscure stuff. I can't do the cutesy thing.

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