Alex Watson

The Flowers of War. Dir. Zhang Yimou. Perf. Christian Bale, Ni Ni, Xinyi Zhang. Beijing New Picture Film Co./ EDKO Film/ New Picture Company, 2011. Film.

Chinese director Zhang Yimou has delivered some of the most beautifully shot cinema of the past decade; such as the lush and colorful *Hero* (2002) which contains most astounding imagery and the equally impressive *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), which featured the heart stopping "Echo Game" scene. Already well known to western audiences, Yimou has brought his perspective of the brutal Japanese invasion of Nanking (1937) in *The Flowers of War*.

John Miller (Christian Bale) is an American mortician who tries to make money from burying an old priest, but is soon forced to take refuge inside a Catholic Cathedral. He becomes the protector of the young girls who reside within its compound. To do so he pretends to be the resident priest. As he bonds with the students, Miller is also faced with some difficult choices.

The Flowers of War is unlike previous Zhang Yimou films. While there are many memorable images, there are also scenes of violence and brutality, showing the effect of the Japanese invasion. The battle sequences are rousing and Yimou films them expertly, particularly when the lone soldier left in Nanking, Major Li (Tong Dawei), takes on a group of Japanese soldiers single-handedly. The futile efforts of the Chinese to defend themselves exemplify their horrific situation. When their efforts fail, we realize that Miller is truly alone.

Redemption is a big theme surrounding Yimou's film. When we first meet John Miller, the man is frankly unlikeable. He is in this hellish place solely for monetary gain and openly confesses that he drinks at any opportunity. But as he sobers up, his eyes are opened to the true horrors surrounding him. He realizes that he can make a difference and through this a deep bond is formed with the girl students, who begin to refer to him as "Father John," his former shadowy self begins to be redeemed!

Another vital subplot involves the arrival of fourteen flamboyant prostitutes who take shelter inside the cathedral. Initially this proves an annoyance for the young girls, but it gives the story a colorful strength.

The “hookers with the hearts of gold” is an idea that has become axiomatic in cinema, but it is the presence of their *de facto* leader Yu Mo (Ni Ni) that makes it different in Yimou’s film. Yu Mo provides the stability and strong female presence needed for the group, and her blossoming romance with Miller is one of the movie’s most touching elements.

It is a shame that *The Flowers of War* has received such a limited release in Europe because it is one of the most heart-wrenching films of the year. Zhang Yimou’s film covers the entire spectrum of emotion and gives the movie its principal strength because we never know what we are going to feel next. Christian Bale delivers another brilliant central performance as Miller. Some might sneer at his character’s change of persona and call it a cliché. The character may be unlikeable at first, but war can changes people in many ways. But it is the debutant Ni Ni who makes the strongest impression as Yu Mo; her beauty is only matched by her charm. She isn’t just all looks: Ni Ni also brings gentleness to her role that makes her essential to the story.

The Flowers of War is a very brutal yet extremely beautiful film that leaves a lasting impression.

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