ARTS

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Christian Bale and Steve Zahn attempt to flee from a prisoner of war camp in 'Rescue Dawn'. Bale, with his usual dedication, starved himself for the role

Testing character to its limits

FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers

Rescue Dawn

CERT 12A, 126 MINS

It is a match made in heaven: Werner Herzog is a wacko German film director with an obsession with nature and humans living on the edge; Christian Bale has become the go-to guy in Hollywood for extreme acting in weird situations. I am amazed they haven't worked together before.

This time Herzog has recast a 1997 documentary he made for German television, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, as a feature. It tells the true story of German-born American navy pilot Dieter Dengler, who was shot down over Laos in the early stages of the Vietnam war and tortured for six months in a Pathet Lao prison camp, before escaping into the jungle with a sickly fellow POW, Duane Martin. He builds a raft and carries Duane down tributaries towards the Mekong river on a death-defying feat of survival.

In one sense this is a traditional jungle survival movie. The rookie soldier who doesn't give up, the torture, the planning of the escape, the escape itself, the eating of beetles and snakes, the oppressive jungle – all the favourite features are there. For a while it seems surprisingly old-fashioned, more genre movie than off-key Herzog.

When the director's personality does start to shine through, it is in the mood rather than any specific event. For a big-budget Hollywood film it is remarkably gritty; there is none of the generic jungle sounds, or overly rich green colouring, or close-ups on drops of dew falling off leaves – all of the features that the genre would usually require. Instead Herzog films the whole thing with an almost documentary-style simplicity, and a closeness that brings you in to the physicality of Dengler's survival. It is not beautiful, but it is intimate and feels unbelievably real.

And then there is the character of Dengler himself. He is just the sort of daredevil, slightly detached, brave and resolutely positive character that Herzog is always drawn to. From interviews I have read with the director, I have no doubt that he sees himself in this archetype. While researching for his 1997 documentary, it turns out Herzog actually became good friends with the real Dieter Dengler: "All that I like about America was somehow embodied in Dieter," he says. "Self-reliance and courage and loyalty and optimism, [and] a strange kind of directness and joy in life." That'd be when, hanging upside-down with an ant's nest strapped to his face, Dengler still manages to laugh, I presume? Or when he tucks into a plateful of maggots with a grin?

This is where the film starts being interesting. Like *Grizzly Man*, Herzog's award-winning documentary about a man so obsessed with grizzly bears he lived (and died) among them, *Rescue Dawn* ends up being about human psychology tested to its limits. Dengler's two fellow American prisoners have reacted very differently to the trials of their two-year detention.

> *Picking the locks of his handcuffs and making knives out of bullets, Dengler is straight out of an Enid Blyton book*

Duane (Steve Zahn) is defeated, shuffling around nervously, hoping to get through each day, and Eugene (Jeremy Davies) has become paranoid and delusional. Starry-eyed and bearded, Eugene still thinks they are going to be released, and threatens to scream if the others try to escape.

Dengler himself is so practical and positive, so loyal to his buddy, never vulnerable and never afraid, that it is almost unconvincing. He is at once worshipped by the director and presented as slightly autistic – much of the humour of the film comes from Dengler's oddly gung-ho attitude. Shouting affectionately at his captors, winking and smiling at female guards, making knives out of bullet shells and picking the locks of his handcuffs, Dengler is straight out of an Enid Blyton book – the hero of the Famous Five.

It is a great performance by Bale, who with characteristic dedication starved himself to the emaciated level of a year-long POW, and who confirms himself to be one of the most watchable actors around. But could anyone really be that heroic? There is something cartoonish about his bravery, which makes the film more jolly but rather less memorable. I would not usually complain about the absence of a scene of desperation, or of an insufficiently harrowing torture scene, but I can't help but feel that the film would have been better if Dengler was permitted to feel pain and doubt.

The question you are supposed to be asking throughout – and this is the point of the genre – is "what would I be like under those circumstances?"

Would you be the Eugene character, losing your grip on reality and turning against your fellow prisoners in a panicked attempt to save yourself? Or would you be the Duane character, benign but lacking that survival instinct, crying and asking to be left for dead? I wonder, really, how many of us would be the Dengler character, the hero of the hour, never losing faith or running out of ideas, loving life and staying loyal to the end. I hope we will never be in a position to find out.

Bodley can help us to rediscover beauty

The Holiness of Beauty

V&A MUSEUM, UNTIL FEBRUARY 17

On October 21, 1907, George Frederick Bodley, the leading English church architect of the Aesthetic Movement, died in the Elizabethan manor house at Water Eaton, Oxfordshire, and in doing so fulfilled a romantic wish to die looking through a lattice window. Bodley was a townsman and only lived in the country at the end of his life. For much of it the scene of his activities was in London and he worked in a drawing office in Gray's Inn, Holborn. In 1941 a bomb destroyed South Square and in doing so effaced the corpus of Bodley's correspondence and drawings. This was a major loss and partly explains why Bodley's life and work has been left in relative obscurity during the revival of interest in Victorian architecture of the last 50 years.

Michael Hall, the editor of *Apollo*, has done more than anybody to research Bodley's achievement and this is encapsulated in a small exhibition, *The Holiness of Beauty: G F Bodley and his Circle*, mounted in the narrow space of the architecture gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Despite the physical limitations and scarcity of material, this is a rich and illuminating tribute to one of the greatest church architects of the 19th century.

A lifelong Anglo-Catholic, Bodley was at the spearhead of the leading art movements of the mid-Victorian period. The first pupil of Sir George Gilbert Scott, he was also the first to commission Morris & Co to decorate his churches and provide them with stained glass designed by Burne-Jones, Rossetti and Holman Hunt. Edward Warren, one of his pupils, said that nobody fulfilled Pre-Raphaelite ideals in the church interior better than Bodley. But that is only part of the story. After a precocious start in the Ruskin-inspired north Italian and French Gothic styles, Bodley moved away from 13th-century continental precedents and returned to the point where Pugin left off when he designed All Saints, Cambridge, in 1863 in the English Decorated style and brought the Gothic Revival full circle.

In 1869 Bodley formed a partnership with Thomas Garner, a later pupil of Scott. This was broken in 1897 when Garner became a Catholic, but in the intervening years they designed a sequence of noble churches that transcended most of their contemporaries. Among their most lavish works is Holy Angels, Hoar Cross, Staffordshire (1871-7). Scholarly, softly radiant, and refined, it is as exquisite in execution as design. In contrast, St Augustine's, Pendlebury, Manchester, (1870-4) is one of the most monumental by virtue of its severe simplicity. Decorated with diaper patterns in muted halftones, it has passages through internal buttresses instead of aisles – a motif once thought to derive from Albi and Spain and often repeated by the next generation, but now attributed by Hall to the Dominican church in Ghent. But perhaps the noblest of all Bodley's churches, and his favourite work, is at Clumber, Nottinghamshire, designed in 1886 for the seventh Duke of Newcastle. It now stands isolated and forlorn in the park of the demolished mansion.

Bodley's drawings, backed by wallpaper which he designed for Watts & Co, the firm he founded with Garner and George Gilbert Scott Jnr, have been gathered from many sources. They show Bodley's designs for furniture and fittings for church and domestic interiors, stained glass, fine embroidery and church plate. He abandoned collaborative design for complete artistic control. Bodley established the stained glass artist, C E Kempe, whose centenary also falls this year, and, under Garner's influence, the firm of Burlison & Grylls, whose matchless work marked the apogee of Victorian stained glass. His metalwork was executed by Barkentin & Krall, the most finished silversmiths of the period. These works are conspicuous for freshness, abiding beauty and taste rather than innovation, and it was beauty that guided Bodley's principles more than originality.

Bodley was led by the traditions of the past. He told his pupils that there is no virtue in being original and taught them to follow beauty, to seek it wholeheartedly and never deviate from it. None carried out these principles more than those who comprised Bodley's school: Comper, Ashbee, F C Eden, Tapper, Hare, Dykes-Bower. His influence continues in Warwick Pethers's sublime Gothic tower at St Edmundsbury Cathedral in Suffolk, the stateliest and most permanent of the recent millenium projects.

Yet, unexpectedly, perhaps Bodley's greatest legacy lies at Downside Abbey where Garner built the choir in 1906 and Giles Gilbert Scott the nave in 1926. Pevsner said that Downside represented the dream of Pugin's English Catholicism at last come true. Pugin was fulfilled in Bodley and the work of the late Gothic Revivalists and his nationalist ideals, liturgical and aesthetic, permeate the abbey church in a form that would have been impossible in his lifetime. The recovery of beauty as a divine imperative is one of the most urgent needs of our time and Bodley's principles demonstrate how the quest can be resumed and continued.

Anthony Symondson SJ

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A triumph of fidelity

THEATRE REVIEW

Nicholas Nickleby

THEATRE ROYAL, NOTTINGHAM

This production provides entertainment of the highest standard. It isn't a take on the novel: it is Dickens himself leaping out of the page.

A large cast play a host of characters. Daniel Weyman, an actor with a guileless Victorian face, makes Nicholas the straight man moving through a world of larger-than-life eccentrics and grotesques. There's Newman Noggs (Richard Bremmer) with those horribly cracking bones in his long fingers; he stands exactly like a Phiz illustration. There's Miss Knag (Tricia Kelly) repeating the last word of everything her mistress says, and there's the monstrous Wackford Squeers (Pip Donaghy).

It being Dickens, there's sentimentality aplenty, most notably in the character of Smike (David Dawson) and his devotion to Nicholas. And there's the theme of the fallen middle class – the Nicklebys, the Mantalinis and the Brays.

The first night of a two-part production ends with a hilariously sent up version of *Romeo and Juliet* – Jonathan Coy and Veronica Roberts are perfect as the ham actor-manager and his wife. It's a wrench when we have to say goodbye, in a splendid musical number, to the strolling players and to the vivacious, smoky-voiced Miss Snevellicci, the most delightful of the three love interest characters played by Zo Waites – Madeline's a shade wet.

Kate Nickleby (Hannah Yelland) isn't wet: she gets more assertive as the darker elements of the play – the depravity and the sexual exploitation of women – become more evident.

During the final rejoicing, an abandoned child is lying in the snow; this is comedy for sure, but it's angry. And, because Nicholas shares Dickens's indignation at "the state of England", he's the moral centre of the play. All the villains get a melodramatic comeuppance. David Yelland, as scheming Uncle Ralph, with his coldly logical voice, is outstanding at this point.

A single town set is used throughout the two-part show, but it is amazingly adaptable.

The Comedy of Errors

THEATRE ROYAL, NOTTINGHAM

The Comedy of Errors offers a ludicrous plot. A Syracuse couple (Egeon and Aemilia) with twin boys, each with the same name, Antipholus, adopt two more twins, again with the same name, Dromio, so that each son will have a servant. They're separated for years and when they eventually meet up in Ephesus there is understandably some confusion.

Under director Nancy Meckler this RSC production, done against a background of jazzy music from a live band in the corner, combines farce with lots of pantomime. There's "oohing" and "ahhing", and a bald bloke in the audience is briefly incorporated into the fun.

More meta-theatre comes when Antipholus of Ephesus (Simon Merrells) has to speak an utterly incomprehensible line and takes a sidelong glance at the audience, as if to say: "I didn't write this."

Ephesus is a decadent seaport populated for the most part by grotesques. This is made most obvious in the episode dominated by the cadaverous Doctor Pinch, which seems out of kilter with the overall spirit of the production. But the tranquillity of the next scene, set outside an abbey and involving long lost mother Aemilia (Annabel Leventon), offers a nice contrast.

The closing scene is beautifully done, partly choreographed in slow motion. It's not just funny: all of the re-unions at the end are genuinely moving.

In fact, as much as anything else, the play is about the triumph of fidelity and long-lasting, respectful love over ordinary knockabout eros. Siobhan Redmond's fine performance as Adriana – spirited and sexy but also in love with an apparently wayward husband – is sufficient to make this clear.

Alan Geary

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