

A CLASSIC OF BRITISH FILM HISTORY

Made during the Summer and Autumn of 1945, at a time when the Second World War was drawing to a close, *A Matter of Life and Death* is now one of the most highly regarded British films ever made, and if you have seen it you will understand why.

It was produced and directed by the famous team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, who also produced many other well loved and beautifully made films such as *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), *Black Narcissus* (1947) and *The Red Shoes* (1950). All of the films made by this English director and Hungarian producer are technically excellent and extremely intelligent, yet to me *A Matter of Life and Death* is possibly the pinnacle of their careers, mixing a superb script, beautiful colour photography and marvelous acting by a perfect cast.

The film takes place in 1945 and concerns the story of how a British aircraft pilot, Peter Carter (played by David Niven), and an American airforce worker called June (played by Kim Hunter) meet and fall in love in the strangest circumstances. The film starts off with Peter talking into his radio to the air traffic controller (June) to say that his aircraft is so severely damaged after being shot at by German planes that he cannot land. However, rather than die in the crash, Peter decides to jump to his death over the English Channel (the 40 km stretch of water that separates England from France). Yet due to the very bad weather that the plane encounters, Peter's jumping from the plane is missed by the people in the afterlife whose job it is to bring them to Heaven. Somehow Peter survives the jump and wakes up on an English beach. What ensues is a story of Peter desperately wanting to stay alive down here on earth whilst the politics and bureaucracy of the heavens demands that he give up his life as he was due to die in the plane crash.

The premise of the film is a romantic one, yet it is also political. The film deals with the aftermath of the Second World War. Peter has to fight for his right to exist in a heavenly court where the prosecutor is an American who was killed by the British in the American war of independence in 1776. In fact the film deals with the history between Britain and America, as well as other nations, and how the British are perceived outside of the country. The violence that came with Britain's empire is also addressed and questioned. When the court jury is discovered to consist of nationalities who were all killed in various wars with the British Empire, all looks bleak for Peter.

This is justifiably classified as a classic of British film history. With a clever, satirical script that addresses Britain's relationship with the rest of the world in 1946, a strong cast and some of the best use of colour ever seen in a film, it is hard to dislike this film. David Niven was a Scottish born actor who had started out in the British army before becoming a film star in Hollywood by the late 1930s.