

# A postcard view of history

## Captain Corelli's Mandolin, directed by John Madden

By Richard Phillips  
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*Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, directed by John Madden and starring Nicolas Cage, Penelope Cruz, John Hurt, Christian Bale and Irene Pappas, is a love story set on the Greek island of Cephalonia during World War II. Adapted from the novel *Corelli's Mandolin*, by Louis de Bernières, the film spans one of the most complex and tumultuous periods of the war. This includes the conquest of Albania by Italian fascist forces in 1940-41, the Nazi occupation of Greece, the rise of local resistance, and the little-known but tragic massacre of thousands of Italian soldiers by the German military on Cephalonia following the fall of Mussolini's fascist regime in Rome in 1943.

The British-born John Madden, who claims the film is a "classic movie experience", directed the popular television series *Sherlock Holmes* and *Inspector Morse* before commencing his filmmaking career. His first three features—*Ethan Frome* (1993), *Golden Gate* (1994) and *Mrs Brown* (1997)—attracted little attention. Then, in 1998, Madden achieved celebrity status after he won seven Oscars for his direction of Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard's *Shakespeare in Love*.

While that movie highlighted Madden's skills as a light comedy director, his latest work is a bland and thoroughly unconvincing work. Instead of exploring the rich content of his subject matter—material for several powerful and thought-provoking movies—Madden has produced a two-hour picture postcard of Celaphonia's winding hillside tracks, pretty villages, golden beaches and turquoise blue seas. The film, which has apparently boosted tourist visits to the island since its release, provides viewers with little understanding of the period. No effort is made to explore the political and emotional motivations of the film's protagonists.

The story opens in 1940 with Pelagia Iannis (Penelope Cruz), the daughter of one of the island's doctors, being courted by Mandras (Christian Bale), a handsome local fisherman. After some initial opposition from Pelagia's father (John Hurt) Mandras becomes engaged to the young woman. But soon after the engagement celebrations, Mandras leaves Pelagia and the island to join the Greek army fighting the Italian forces in nearby Albania. He vows to return and marry her after the fascists have been defeated.

Hitler and Mussolini's troops, however, defeat Greece and divide up the country. Cephalonia is occupied by Italian troops and local villagers are coerced into billeting the soldiers. One Italian, the mandolin-playing Captain Antonio Corelli (Nicolas Cage) is put up at the Iannis home. Corelli, who heads an artillery regiment, tells Pelagia that he has "never aimed a gun at anyone". The Italian troops are all high-spirited individuals, who love to sing opera, drink wine and frolic with prostitutes or girlfriends on the island's unspoiled beaches.

While the strong-willed Pelagia is hostile at first to Corelli, she gradually warms to his company and the two fall in love. Mandras, who has been severely wounded during the fighting in Albania, eventually returns and decides to join the Greek resistance. Madden does not explain why Mandras and other young islanders decided to fight in Albania, why they joined the resistance or what their attitude was towards fascism. In fact, the word fascism is not mentioned by anyone during the entire movie—a remarkable omission for a film about this profoundly political era.

The climax of the film—the massacre of thousands of Italian troops by German soldiers in September 1943, after the disintegration of Mussolini's fascist regime in Rome—is reduced to a series of confused battle scenes.

According to official records, more than 4,740 Italian soldiers were killed in combat or executed outright by German firing squads during a 10-day bloody conflagration. Some 4,000 survivors were rounded up and dispatched to German labour camps. Tragically, the majority of these prisoners—almost 3,000—met their deaths when German ships hit mines and sank in the Mediterranean. The final Italian death toll in this catastrophic episode was over 10,000—almost the entire 12,000-strong division.

Little of this makes its way to the screen, let alone any understanding of what produced the bloody conflict. That is, unless one accepts the film's mindless view that Germans are inherently aggressive, Italian naturally fun-loving individuals, and the two former allies could never really get along.

Corelli mobilises his regiment against the Nazis during the conflict but is eventually captured. He survives a German firing squad and is secretly treated for his wounds by Pelagia's father. Later, with the assistance of the Greek resistance, who

have come to the aid of the Italian troops, he escapes to Italy and the lovers lose contact. But their love endures and the film ends with the couple reunited in their old age when Corelli returns after an earthquake on the island some years later.

De Bernières' novel, which has sold more than 1.5 million copies since its publication in 1994, obviously presented a number of problems for Madden and his producers. De Bernières is a rightwing ideologue and his book is a false and politically motivated attack on the Greek partisan movement and its struggle against the occupying fascist forces.

According to press reports, the author's research involved lengthy discussions with various reactionary figures, including Alexandros Rallis, a relative of Ionnis Rallis, the Greek dictator appointed by the Nazis. In fact, some sections of the book were so crude and historically distorted that the publishers omitted them from the Greek language edition. Ioannis Metaxas, the fascist military dictator who ruled Greece from 1936-41, is portrayed sympathetically in the book while the resistance fighters are presented as thugs, thieves and lazy cowards who refused to defend the Italian soldiers fighting the Nazis.

Greek resistance fighters and 89-year old Amos Pampaloni, the real-life Corelli, have denounced the novel as anti-communist slander. One Greek veteran told the press that the book was "part of a global drive to rewrite history, to reverse historical facts, to convince people that political and social change is a dead end and that if you struggle for a better world, it only leads to bloodshed, suffering and failure".

Prior to the commencement of filming on the island, local members of PASOK, Greece's rightwing social democratic party, threatened to take the filmmakers to the International Court of Justice if they included any of de Bernières' more outrageous slanders. These threats were dropped after negotiations and Madden and his scriptwriter Shawn Slovo, the daughter of former South African Communist Party leader Joe Slovo, rewrote much of the film's original script.

An attempted rape of Pelagia by the partisan Mandras was cut from the film and those sections of the novel falsely equating the partisans and the Greek Communist Party with the Nazis were omitted. New material was also written to clearly demonstrate the assistance provided by the Greek resistance to Italian soldiers.

Notwithstanding these necessary attempts to establish the historical record, Madden did not include anything from the book on the bloody civil war, which continued in Greece until the late 1940s, long after the Nazis were defeated in the rest of Europe. Nor is any reference made to the fact that the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy actively endorsed the bloody suppression of the Greek resistance by British and US troops, as part of the post-WWII settlement. This included the bombing of Cephalonia by the British air force. The film simply skips from the defeat of the Italian forces by the Nazis and Corelli's miraculous escape, to an earthquake on the island in 1953.

While Madden no doubt disagrees with much of de Bernières

book, and has said that he was deeply moved by discussions he held with partisan fighters on the island, none of this feeling is transmitted in the film. Comments by Tim Bevan, the film's producer, probably provide a better indication of the light-minded and superficial approach taken by many of those involved in the project.

"Dr Zhivago is the movie we're making... a big epic romance," Bevan told one newspaper. "[T]he argument over the politics and the civil war is as dull as ditchwater as far as we're concerned. What this is about is maintaining an emotional through-line for 100 minutes and making them [audiences] cry a lot."

But contrary to Bevan's assertions, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* fails to even meet these simple requirements. The script is hackneyed, performances embarrassing and characters unconvincing. One of the countless examples of the film's extraordinarily clichéd dialogue is when Pelagia first meets Corelli. She declares that a "brave Italian is a freak of nature" and remonstrates with him for his constant singing in a time of war. His response: "We're Italian. We're famous for singing, eating, and making love". Later, as she begins to fall for Corelli, she declares: "I have no right to make you love me."

Cruz, who was obviously chosen for her superstar status, is awkward. Whether running down the dirt roads of the island, cutting vegetables in the family kitchen, or doing embroidery, she is so obviously out of place that one is constantly expecting her to trip over or cut herself. Cage, who is capable of serious work when coupled with the right director, seems to have learnt his Italian accent watching American pasta sauce commercials. Their love affair, which is supposed to be the film's central axis, is particularly unpersuasive and passionless.

The characters portrayed in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* are not real people, but a rather insulting collection of national stereotypes speaking English with a diverse collection of jarring accents. The Greek villagers and peasants are stoically patriotic or wise philosophers; the Germans are dour and violent; and the Italians are romantic lovers of song. And no matter how difficult the suffering produced by the war, love, devotion or other small miracles somehow turn up to resolve all problems.

Those expecting an intelligent and challenging historical drama should avoid this film. Those looking for a genuinely compelling romance would be better advised to rent one of the many classic movies from this genre readily available at their local video store.

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