Movie Review

**Paradise Road (1997)**

April 11, 1997

It Takes a Saint to Keep a Prison Camp Humming

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Published: April 11, 1997

With the possible exceptions of Vanessa Redgrave and Meryl Streep, no actress is better at projecting an empathetic, high-minded nobility than Glenn Close. And in ''Paradise Road,'' Bruce Beresford's grandly messy World War II epic, she has the saintliest role yet in a gallery of screen characters notable for their angelic (''The Natural'') and demonic (''Fatal Attraction,'' ''Dangerous Liaisons'') extremes.

Playing Adrienne Pargiter, the founder and conductor of an all-female vocal orchestra formed in a Japanese prison camp during World War II, Ms. Close is starved, humiliated, beaten and nearly killed. Through it all, she maintains her impeccable boarding-school manners along with the indomitable self-confidence of a Great Lady serenely pulling herself up out of the mud.

As Ms. Close lifts her hands to lead a humming chorus of the Largo from Dvorak's ''New World'' Symphony, her eyes glisten, her chin tilts upward at an angle that transforms her into a glowing patrician goddess, and a triumphant little smile plays across her lips. It isn't so much the music but Ms. Close's aura of holiness that momentarily softens the hearts of her vicious captors who, virtually hypnotized, sit down on the grass and drink in the ethereal choral rhapsody.

Later when a Japanese officer forces her into the woods, either, she imagines, to rape or kill her, it turns out that all he wants to do is sing for her approval. For this bizarre audition, which suggests a parody of ''The King and I,'' Ms. Close is posed against a magnificently gnarled old tree, and a heavenly light streams across her face.

The scene is a typically overdramatized moment in a big, splashy film that feels unconvincing despite the fact that it is based on true incidents. Adhering to the conventions of a vintage World War II drama, it is really the female version of a 1940's combat movie preaching an upbeat message of solidarity in adversity. In the stereotypical cross-section of prisoners, Ms. Close is the group's de facto leader, the upscale, matronly equivalent of a Dana Andrews character.

''Paradise Road'' opens with a terrific bang as the revelry in a swanky hotel ballroom in Singapore is shattered by Japanese bombs. It is 1942, and the supposedly impregnable city is being stormed by Japanese troops. All Europeans are instructed to evacuate immediately. Adrienne is one of hundreds of women assigned to a ship that in the movie's most spectacular scene is bombed by Japanese planes. One of the few stranded without a lifeboat, she swims to shore and finds herself in a Sumatran marsh. By the time she has made her way to a rundown village, most of the other women from the boat have been herded into the town square by barking Japanese soldiers.

At this point, the movie turns into a sprawling prison-camp soap opera that tries to track far too many characters than it can comfortably handle. Among the more prominent are Margaret Drummond (Pauline Collins), a humble, sweet-natured Christian missionary who helps Adrienne organize the vocal orchestra, and Dr. Verstak (Frances McDormand), a cynical German-Jewish emigre who appoints herself the camp's resident physician and in-house smuggler of black-market goodies.

Jennifer Ehle is Rosemary Leighton-Jones, a picture-perfect English ingenue pining for her soldier boyfriend, and Elizabeth Spriggs a snobbish upper-class woman clinging to her beloved dog, which of course is shot by the Japanese. There is much to-do about the tension between the English and the Dutch prisoners who get into a brawl over a piece of soap.

In trying to keep track of everybody while providing enough melodrama to sustain an atmosphere of controlled terror, ''Paradise Road'' stumbles all over itself and never really finds its center. But it has some hair-raising moments. In the most horrifying scene, a prisoner who has flouted the rules is called in front of the camp, doused with gasoline and burned to a cinder. And as the film speeds along, the death toll among the prisoners steadily mounts.

If ''Paradise Road'' had an extra half-hour to develop its characters, it might have amounted to something more substantial than a series of disconnected little dramas. But despite the strong ensemble acting (Ms. McDormand's caricatured doctor is a surprising exception), the characters never become full enough for us to care a great deal about who survives and who doesn't.

It's not Ms. Close's fault that even Adrienne remains a mystery. We glimpse her with her husband for a moment in the opening scene, but thenceforth there is barely a mention of him or of their life together. It's almost as though this radiant creature were an Olympian statue who materialized like Glinda the Good Witch just in the nick of time to waft sweet music into an Oz that has turned into an inferno.

''Paradise Road'' is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It has nudity and scenes of violence, including one of torture.  
  
PARADISE ROAD   
  
Written and directed by Bruce Beresford; director of photography, Peter James; edited by Timothy Wellburn; production designer, Herbert Pinter; produced by Sue Milliken and Greg Coote; released by Fox Searchlight. Running time: 110 minutes. This film is rated R.  
  
WITH: Glenn Close (Adrienne Pargiter), Pauline Collins (Margaret Drummond), Frances McDormand (Dr. Verstak), Jennifer Ehle (Rosemary Leighton-Jones) and Elizabeth Spriggs (Mrs. Roberts).