

blueberry jam: “It may seem useless as a life project, but I assure you it’s no more useless than what I’ve done here,” he admits to Molly. The infrastructure and bureaucracy of empire are largely meaningless in this milieu. The further these foreigners move through these lands, the less we see of them, like dying plants being absorbed into the earth. The voices on the soundtrack narrating Edward and Molly’s stories in their own languages give the sense that they’ve already become myths, phantoms in a place that remains forever strange to them — even as its very ordinariness shines through in the realistic textures of what we’re actually seeing. *Grand Tour*, through its very aesthetic, gently refutes this need to “understand” anything.

That is perhaps the film’s most enchanting quality — the way it presents the everyday with a sense of wonder, undercutting what would have been the exoticizing gaze of its early-20th-century lens while reminding us that, yes, reality is often magical and inscrutable. It’s right there in the opening frames, which present an unadorned but nevertheless amazing series of shots of three men manually turning a motorless Ferris wheel at an amusement park in contemporary Myanmar. They could be acrobats or dancers as they kick it, pull it, leap on it, and dip beneath it at impossible angles to give the wheel a firm, quick push right as it approaches the ground. *Grand Tour* is a little like these men and their machine: a deliberately ramshackle work made more captivating through its lack of conventional modes of propulsion and meaning. And by laying bare its artifice, it holds up the unknowable nature of the world as one of life’s most enduring and divine mysteries. ♦

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December 7 at 2220 Arts + Archives w/ Paul and Menkes in person

Acropolis Cinema and the SmallRig Awards present:



December 3, 2024 – The Culver Theater

ABOUT THE FILM

In this fanciful and high-spirited cinematic expedition, the uncommonly ambitious Portuguese filmmaker Miguel Gomes (*Tabu; Arabian Nights*) takes a journey across East Asia, skipping through time and countries with delirious abandon to tell the tale of an unsettled couple from colonial England and the world as it both expands and closes in around them. It's 1918, and Edward (Gonçalo Waddington) has escaped the clutches of beckoning marriage, leaving his bemused fiancée, Molly (Crista Alfiate), in indefatigable pursuit. Edward gives chase from Mandalay to Bangkok to Shanghai and beyond, while Gomes responds with a splendid and enthralling series of scenes that use a magic form of cinema to situate us in these places both then and now, keeping us at a knowingly exotic traveler's distance while also immersing us in rhythm, texture, and emotional reality. Whether black-and-white or color, zigzagging or meditative in tone, scripted or captured as documentary, *Grand Tour* is splendid, moving, and human-scaled. Winner of the Best Director prize at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival. *Co-presented by the SmallRig Awards.*

TRT: 129 min

In person: Miguel Gomes

About the SmallRig Awards:

The SmallRig Awards were established by SmallRig to recognize and support visual storytellers who focus on addressing social issues. We believe in the power of storytelling to effect meaningful change and improve the world for future generations.

SmallRig's mission has always been to provide the public with lightweight, high-quality equipment that empowers them to capture compelling stories in everyday life. With the SmallRig Awards, we are expanding this mission to not only support the production of these stories but also to discover important narratives, nurture emerging storytelling talents, and contribute to a better world.

Open to individuals and organizations worldwide, the SmallRig Awards will distribute 22 prizes with cash prizes ranging from \$800 to \$12,000. The call for entries is now open, and submissions will close on December 31, 2024. For more information about the Smallrig Awards and submission guidelines, visit the official awards website at <https://www.smallrig.com/activity/SmallRigAwards>. Submissions can be made directly on the website or on Filmfreeway at <https://filmfreeway.com/SmallRigAwards>.

Grand Tour by Bilge Ebiri

The following article was originally published by New York Magazine, October 9, 2024

Like an epic poem told through a multitude of voices, Miguel Gomes's *Grand Tour* is a movie of unorthodox sweep and diffuse grace. In following the fanciful story of two lovers journeying separately through East and Southeast Asia in the early 20th century, Gomes mixes staged scenes with documentary footage — some of it distinctly modern, some of it seemingly more timeless. The film is narrated in the languages of the cultures the characters move through, as Burmese gives way to Thai, to Vietnamese, and beyond — a wandering, collective dream. Gomes won a richly deserved Best Director prize at Cannes for *Grand Tour*, which screens at the New York Film

Festival this week. The Portuguese filmmaker, an art-house darling whose work tends to be both playful and uncompromising, has described the imagery of *Grand Tour* as evoking for him “the spectacle of the world,” which makes the picture a lovely paradox: Through the occasionally absurd and self-consciously artificial tale of two souls hopping across a continent, he has fashioned a work that inspires us to look closer at our real world and how we live in it.

In the film's first half, a handsome British colonial official stationed in Rangoon, Edward Abbot (Gonçalo Waddington), flees his unseen fiancée, Molly (Crista Alfiate), by drifting from city to city — Singapore, Bangkok, Saigon, Manila, Osaka, and farther. Anxious and uncertain, he's not sure why he's trying to get away from Molly. Waiting with a bouquet of flowers for her ship to arrive in Mandalay, Edward imagines himself “floating gently in the muddy river stream.” It's a quiet dream of freedom as a state of being, tossed this way and that. And before he knows it, he's giving out his flowers to other women on the dock and stowing away to Singapore, beginning a journey marked more by chance and stumbles than anything resembling a plan or a purpose.

The second half follows Molly, who with her constant laugh and resolute nature cuts a different figure than the ambling, hapless Edward. She is nothing but purpose. And as she traces the same path that he did, we may notice a different attitude towards her surroundings emerging. If her ostensible paramour was marked by sadness and an inability to relate, Molly connects more with places and things. For all her single-mindedness, she's strangely more open to discovery. At times, it feels like we're watching two different attitudes toward life. And yet, as is true for all of us, these two people's fates wind up being not dissimilar.

The film only loosely follows its characters' itineraries: Gomes cuts to street scenes and elaborate marionette performances and shadow puppets, karaoke songs and carnivals, as much as he cuts to Edward or Molly themselves. The director doesn't try too hard to make to make his images and sounds cohere. The seams show by design, but maybe also by circumstance: As he explained to *Film Comment*, Gomes shot some of these documentary sights and sounds in early 2020, before he had a script; others were filmed remotely by a local crew with the director guiding them from Lisbon via live feed, before he finally shot the more narrative, “primary” scenes in a studio with his actors. Thus, a beautifully lit sequence, captured in shadowy black-and-white on a soundstage and complete with awkward extras in the background, might be followed by images of modern Shanghai or Myanmar, mixing color and black-and-white. The effect is not the dissonance we might expect, but a greater level of engagement, as Gomes finds glancing poetic corollaries to the stories his narrators are telling. A rickety modern-day fishing boat pattering from Bangkok to Saigon at twilight fires the imagination with possibility. Could that shadowy figure at the prow be someone from Edward's tale? Could this sky needle be a temple, or a magnificent tree? Could this gruff old man playing mahjong in a nondescript hall be a curious gambler on the last boat up the Mekong, laughing in the face of Edward's existential crisis? The film returns us to a childlike gaze, marveling at a world alive with possibility, where every sight lives on a continuum of meaning.

These visual and sonic contrasts are certainly interesting and artful, but they speak to something more. “The end of the empire is inevitable,” an aging British consul in China says in the film. “We will leave without having understood a thing.” (True to Gomes's playful approach, all the Brits in the movie speak Portuguese.) A pastor echoes that consul later, as he says he's giving up his mission and returning home to England and a life of newspapers and