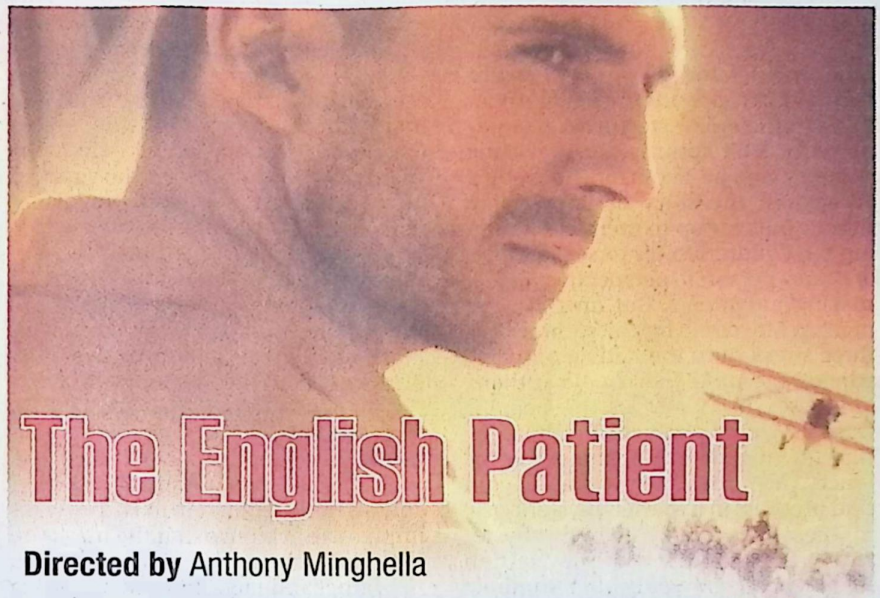


Directed by Anthony Minghella

Writing credits (WGA)
Michael Ondaatje (novel)
Anthony Minghella (screenplay)
Genre: Romance / Drama / War
Tagline: In love, there are no boundaries
Campus rating: 8.9/10

Get ready for the great romance of the movie year. It's clear from the shimmering, startling opening shot: Almasy (Ralph Fiennes), a Hungarian count, desert explorer and pilot, is flying Katharine Clifton (Kristin Scott Thomas), the married Englishwoman he loves, over the Sahara in a small plane during World War II. German fire sends them parachuting to the desert in flames, his body clinging to hers in a paradigm of love and death. Admirers of the 1992 novel by Michael Ondaatje won't remember things beginning that way because they didn't. Writer and director Anthony Minghella (*Truly, Madly, Deeply*) has altered the novel. Ondaatje, a Canadian citizen born in Sri Lanka, told his story in lyrical bursts. Minghella, born in England to Italian parents, imposes a more linear structure, maximizes Almasy and Katharine at the expense of other characters, and sacrifices some of the book's mystery for cinematic coherence. Yet Ondaatje's poetic spirit flares brightly onscreen.

Granted, *The English Patient* runs nearly three hours and sounds like the self-important froufrou (*Out of Africa*) that wins Oscars and bores most of us brainless. But the gifted Minghella has distilled the novel with rare grace and incendiary feeling. Almasy, burned beyond recognition and ripped from the dead Katharine by Bedouins, is cared for at an army hospital where he is known only as "the English patient." When the Allies move on, Hana (Juliette Binoche), a Canadian nurse, cares for her patient alone at an abandoned Italian monastery, where she comforts him with reading and morphine. The two aren't alone for long. Kip (Naveen Andrews), a Sikh officer in the British Army, arrives to defuse bombs and stays to quicken a passion in Hana that she had long thought dead. Caravaggio (Willem Dafoe in full, flinty vigor), a crafty thief who had his thumbs cut off by the Nazis, comes to find out whether the English patient is really the German spy who betrayed him.

This hypnotic epic, impeccably produced by Saul Zaentz (*Amadeus*) and stunningly shot by John Seale (*Witness*), moves across time and the borders of Italy, Egypt and North Africa to link its two love stories. Binoche and Andrews are vibrant and moving, though the back story of Hana and Kip's interracial affair has been truncated for the screen. It's the memories of the English patient, filtered through pain and drug-induced delirium, that provide the focus for Minghella, whose artful script and direction mark him as a master of intimate emotion.

Fiennes, in or out of disfiguring makeup, gives a performance of probing intelligence and passionate heart. And Scott Thomas, mistaken as chilly by those who know her only from *Four Weddings and a Funeral,* is an incandescent revelation in her first full-out romantic role. Katharine betrays her husband (a superb, touching Colin Firth) in scenes of sizzling eroticism with Almasy that lead to scalding guilt. On first seeing Katharine, Almasy is told by a friend: "She's charming, and she's read everything," Intellect and carnality fuse combustibly in the rhapsodically sexy Scott Thomas. Flashbacks reveal how the cool, cynical Almasy becomes drunk on Katharine, forging his honor through a commitment that prevails over the conflicting loyalties of war. With *The English Patient,* Minghella proves that a movie love story can be smart, principled and provoking, and still sweep you away.

