

Walk With Me (PG)

Directed by Marc J. Francis and Max Pugh



'18 UK 1hr 34mins

Mon 1 - Thu 11 Jan

Slow down and breathe. This contemplative journey into the world of mindfulness and the Zen Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh, narrated by Benedict Cumberbatch, is a rare insight into life within a monastic community and what it means to devote one's life to mindfulness.

With unprecedented access to the famous secluded monastery of Plum Village in rural France, *Walk With Me* captures the daily routine and rituals of monks and nuns on a quest to develop a deep sense of presence. It is an insightful rumination (amplified by insights from Thich Nhat Hanh's early journals, which Cumberbatch reads) on the pursuit of happiness, living in the present and our attachment to material things - a welcome remedy to the stresses of city life and a world in turmoil.

These are Director Statements from Walk With Me's directors:

MAX PUGH

Ten years ago my younger brother gave up his money, his car and his house, and ordained as a Buddhist monk in the tradition of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. His decision did not entirely come as a surprise to me, as he had been leaning towards Buddhism since his graduation from university a few years earlier.

We spoke at length about his choice of 'career', but it wasn't until an elder monk from his community approached me about shooting a documentary during their 2011 US and Canada teaching tour with Thich Nhat Hanh that I really had a chance to experience monastic life for myself. At this point, I teamed up with my old friend and fellow film director Marc J. Francis and the film now known as 'Walk With Me' was born.

The experience of being on the road with the monastics changed my life in many ways. The practice of deep listening, sharing and living alongside the monastics moved me to dig deeper and to work harder to find ways to best represent their way of being on film.

We invested a lot of time in the film process to allow for experimentation and the chance to develop a cinematic language capable of communicating the actual lived practice of a life lived differently and mindfully.

We focussed on an experiential approach; to create a visceral and immersive experience which plunges the audience deep into the poetry of the present moment - a feeling so elusive in

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- Positive Meditation run classes and workshops throughout the year. Their next Mindfulness and Positivity workshop is on 21 Jan at the Bristol Harbour Hotel (where there are also weekly drop in classes) and the next Mindfulness and Positivity course starts on Jan 9 at Bristol City Yoga. Visit positivemeditation.com for further info and to book

- The Bristol Sangha (who practise in the same tradition as Thich Nhat Hanh) meets at 19:00 at the Friends Meeting House on Hampton Road on the 1st, 3rd and 5th Wednesday of each month. Visit mindfulmeditationbristol.org.uk for more information

the reality of the daily grind.

When Thich Nhat Hanh suffered a life-changing stroke soon after we finished filming, it became clear that there would never be a chance to make a film with Thich Nhat Hanh and his community in this way again. We therefore felt a responsibility to accurately portray what we had experienced living with the monastics.

MARC J. FRANCIS

Before starting this film, I knew very little about Thich Nhat Hanh but I had always been curious about Zen Buddhism. I had also just become a father and I was beginning to yearn for more consciousness and presence in my life, not just for myself but for those who I loved too - particularly my children.

As soon as I saw Thich Nhat Hanh for the first time, I was really impressed by his sense of presence and the way he was so mindful, and that encounter inspired me to find a way to make a film that could capture that experience.

Traditionally most films use a few characters with clear narrative arcs, but to make this film we had to abandon these conventions because Thich Nhat Hanh didn't want to be singled out or idolized in any way. So, we had to find an approach that could somehow make the whole community the main character of the film.

I spent many weeks at the monasteries in France and the US without my camera practicing mindfulness and learning their way of seeing and being in the world. When we did finally introduce our cameras there was a trust and openness that allowed us to capture a level of intimacy that we had long been searching for.

The making of the film became a mindfulness practice in itself. We had to remain non-attached to our outcomes because we never knew what would happen each day. Some days we couldn't film anything, and on others we managed to capture great scenes.

Ultimately, we wanted to find a cinematic language that could transmit to the audience our own personal experience in the monastery so it could feel like a meditation in itself.

We avoided using exposition through talking-head devices, and left out personal interviews of the monastics themselves. Instead we focused solely on a close-up observational style to film the monastics, and combined that with wide shots to capture the natural world that the monastics inhabited.

In post-production, we amplified the natural sounds in the film to draw the audience into the heart of the scene as much as possible, and used music very sparingly – only when it felt like it was coming from the fabric of the moment itself.

Finally, to give some sense of anchor or guide for the film we selected passages from 'Fragrant Palm Leaves', a journal that Thich Nhat Hanh wrote in the 1960s, and cast Benedict Cumberbatch to play his voice. These passages capture some of Thich Nhat Hanh's most insightful and vulnerable moments of his early monkhood where he describes in wondrous detail his feelings about being true to himself and committing to his path.

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