

Movie Review: Defiance

Written by {ga=mitch}

Wednesday, January 28 2009 7:00 PM -

"Schindler's List", "The Downfall", and "Letters From Iwo Jima". Three phenomenal movies, all of which focused on World War II from a non-United States viewpoint. In "Defiance", Mitch says we now have another film that we can add to that sub-genre. Starring Daniel Craig and Liev Schreiber, the film relives an excellent (and true) story from WW II, told brilliantly by director Edward Zwick ("Blood Diamond", "The Last Samurai", "Courage Under Fire").



One of the great things about movies is that they sometimes can teach you something about history that you don't know...even if the story they present onscreen is tweaked somewhat for "dramatic purposes". An advantage of this type of storytelling is that it can also show you things from a totally different perspective.

World War II is a classic example.

Almost everything we have seen on film, and most of what the vast majority of us have read in our history books, has come from the viewpoint of the United States, or sometimes that of Great Britain.

But through movies, we get to see it from a new and unique angle.

The examples are numerous. "Schindler's List" jumps immediately to mind, but you can also look at such recent films as "Enemy at the Gates" (detailing the Battle of Stalingrad), "Der Untergang" (English translation - "Downfall", showing Hitler's last days), and Clint Eastwood's superior half of his Iwo Jima sister films "Letters From Iwo Jima" that showed the invasion from the Japanese point of view.

Each of those films were both highly entertaining and highly educational.

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Add another to that list; "Defiance";.

I will shamefully admit that I was completely unaware of this story until after I saw the movie and came back home and did a little research. But then again, 15 years ago, I wasn't that aware of who Oskar Schindler was, and why he mattered. In both cases, it was most likely due to the fact that Americans had nothing to do whatsoever with the story.

Even so, it is a tale very much deserving to be told on film. It takes place in a disputed area of Poland on the border with the Soviet Union, land that is now part of Belarus.

For the large Jewish population in that area, being part of Poland or the USSR was immaterial, because in 1941, the area was occupied by the Nazis, who were continuing their policy of genocide against anyone of the Jewish faith.

Witnessing the death of their parents, four brothers from the Bielski family escape to the deep Naliboki Forest. Soon, they are joined by other Jewish refugees. Eventually, over 1,200 Jews made up a community within the forest that successfully hid from the Nazis while also providing fighting assistance to the Soviet partisans, in addition to having created their own village that included schools, shops, a judicial system, and a synagogue.

The film's focus is on the accidental establishment of that forest community, and the two men most responsible for its creation and its preservation; Tuvia and Zus Bielski. Played by Daniel Craig and Liev Schreiber, their personalities and methods could not be more different.

Tuvia is a natural leader; bold, decisive, intelligent, but at the same time, always far more interested in preserving lives than he is in taking them (the one early exception being his revenge towards those responsible for the killing of his parents).

Zus is a fighter, always looking for a battle, contemptuous of those unwilling or unable to take the war directly to the Germans by any means possible.

He opposes Tuvia's plans to turn no one away, instead wishing for the community to be made only of those willing and able to fight.

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These two are continually united, however, by their two younger brothers; Asael and Aron. Asael (Jamie Bell) is a young man who seems to share both of his older brothers traits, and becomes Tuvia's trusted confidant and second-in-command when Zus leaves to fight with the Russian Army.

Aron (Geroge MacKay) is a younger boy of about 12, traumatized by the scenes of butchery he has observed.

The film does an excellent job of progressing the story of how the group formed, and how it grew and was held together, sometimes seemingly just from the sheer willpower of Tuvia Bielski. Director Edward Zwick has previously shown his talent in making movies that alternate between action and reflection, previously helming "Blood Diamond", "The Last Samurai", and "Courage Under Fire". Here, the big Set Pieces are done very well; battle scenes and escape scenes were extremely well done and riveting.

It also is a Holocaust tale showing Jews in an entirely different light. These are not people resigned to their fate, walking meekly into death camps.

They are willing to fight for their right to live and are also willing to bravely sacrifice their own lives to protect others.

Women and young boys are shown on the front line of an attack, fighting until their dying breaths to give others time to escape.

It was not an easy life in the woods, especially during the winter, and Zwick does an excellent job in showing the fortitude and resiliency needed to survive there.

Where Zwick was weaker, however, was in his handling of the more intimate scenes. The nature of the forest community allowed for romance to develop.

Unfortunately, the courting scenes involving the three older brothers and their prospective mates were quite awkward, and would often blunt the momentum built up in the previous scene.

Further dragging down the film were "character development" scenes between various secondary members of the camp.

It's obvious that the scenes were put in so that the rest of the camp was seen as something more than just "people protected by the Bielskis", but the stilted dialog and the timing of the scenes once again took away from the film as a whole.

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And at 2 hours and 17 minutes, this is a film that was in desperate need of editing.

Be that as it may, the film as a whole still soars on the backs of Craig and Schreiber. If you would have described to me the brothers' personalities, without any hint as to which was 'the leader', I would have certainly guessed that it would have been the more cerebral appearing Schreiber that would have been Tuvia, and the angrier, bellicose Zus who would have been portrayed by Craig.

The fact that is was completely reversed worked perfectly, and showed each actors skills in a far more defined manner.

From watching Craig as James Bond, you know he has the capability of showing a man of violent means.

With that background in mind, he fully fleshes out Tuvia as a man of compassion and generosity; but one still possessing the attributes needed to make tough decisions in brutal, life-and-death situations.

Conversely, Zus' menace and tenacity are presented first and foremost in the man; but with Schreiber's ability as an actor, you also can see the vulnerability and caring as well that makes him much more than just Tuvia's attack dog.

In all, the movie was very much worth watching, even though there were numerous times that I wished that it would just hurry up and get on to the next part of it, as there were several scenes that were not that interesting. In the hands of a better editor, this could have easily been an Oscar contender due to the subject matter, and the performance of the two leads.

But since that wasn't the case, it will land outside my Top 10 for 2008, although it is still a movie that I highly recommend.

My Rating - Frank Ryan (3 Footballs)