



Sarah (Connie Nielsen) and Jannik (Nikolaj Lie Kaas).

ERIK AAVATSMARK, IFC FILMS, 2005.

War's Scars

Subverting the family dynamic

BROTHERS (Denmark, 2004): Directed by Susanne Bier. Story by Bier and Anders Thomas Jensen. Written by Jensen and Bier. Produced by Sisse Graum Jorgensen. Executive producer, Peter Aalbaek Jensen. Cinematography, Morten Soborg. Editor, Pernille Bech Christensen. Production design, Per Strellt. Costume design, Signe Sejlund. Composer, Johan Soderqvist. Starring Connie Nielsen Ulrich Thomsen and Nikolaj Lie Kaas, with Bent Mejding, Solbjorg Højfeldt, Sarah Juel Werner and Rebecca Logstrup Soltau. IFC Films, 2005. R. 117 minutes.

It's a given that a soldier returning from the frontlines of a war will have difficulty adjusting to civilian life. But when the war is not one the public fully supports, re-entry can be more complicated. And if the soldier has been captured by the enemy, accepting his own survival will be psychologically fraught. While we've learned to call these experiences post-traumatic stress disorders, that recognition doesn't begin to explore the shame, guilt, betrayal and rage that disrupts the soldier's life and affects all those around him.

Danish filmmaker Susanne Bier (*Open Hearts*, 2002) has made a politically neutral film in which a responsible major in the military goes to Afghanistan as part of Denmark's contribution to the United Nations forces there. Michael (Ulrich Thomsen) has to leave the day following his brother Jannik's (Nikolaj Lie Kaas) release from prison for bank robbery and assault.

Michael has picked up Jannik at the prison, and they are going to a family dinner with their parents and Michael's wife, Sarah (Connie Nielsen), and two daughters, Natalia (Sarah Juel Werner) and Camilla (Rebecca Logstrup Soltau). But Michael and Jannik have a fight. Jannik gets out of the car in a huff and takes off across a field, turning up at the house after everyone is seated for dinner. This scene sets up the family dynamic: Michael, the good son; Jannik the screwup.

To further inflame the already tense gathering, Jannik makes derogatory comments about the war, taunting Michael and getting his dad's patriotism fired up. Sarah and the girls stay out of the fray. But the next morning Natalia refuses to kiss her dad good-bye, because she doesn't want him to go.

Like wise children in movie family dramas, Natalia is the family's emotional weath-

er-vane, wearing her feelings in every situation. After her dad leaves and then is reported dead when his helicopter is shot down, Natalia becomes closer to Jannik, who steps up to his responsibility to his brother's family slowly but surely. Meanwhile, we see what is going on for Michael, who is captured by the enemy.

In this family group, the major characters have the opportunity to change and grow. Because she respects her characters, Bier doesn't lock the brothers into being opposites, always in conflict, one right, one wrong. While horrific events require Michael to act against his own training to do unimaginable things, the moments when Sarah and the girls find time to giggle with Jannik are a gift. It's human to balance life's darkness with the light, and Bier has a knack for making their intertwining seem natural.

Connie Nielsen is a luminous Sarah, gentle but strong, lighthearted but mature. She was memorable in *Gladiator* (2001), *Rushmore* (1998), *Permanent Midnight* (1998) and other films. Like Diane Lane in *Walk on the Moon* (1999) and *Unfaithful* (2002), whom she most resembles, Nielsen could be underestimated as an actress because of her beauty, but she is not forgettable. She's the stable center of *Brothers*, while the two siblings explore and subvert the divisive family roles they've always played.

Ulrich Thomsen first attracted my attention as Christian in Thomas Vinterberg's powerful family drama, *The Celebration* (1998), which won him a Danish Film Academy award, his second. Christian was also a role where Thomsen played the "good brother," albeit the sibling who confronts his sexually abusive father at his 60th birthday celebration.

As Jannik, Nikolaj Lie Kaas has the plum role: a bad brother who turns good but is not recognized by his nuclear family for his goodness. Kaas' Jannik is an anti-hero worth cheering for.

Brothers opens Friday, July 15 at the Bijou with my highest recommendations. See it early, because other films are lined up right behind it.

ew

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