



## Darkness Falls

The story of Daniel Pearl

**A MIGHTY HEART:** Directed by Michael Winterbottom. Written by John Orloff, based upon the book by Mariane Pearl. Cinematography, Marcel Zyskind. Music, Harry Escott and Molly Nyman. Starring Dan Futterman, Angelina Jolie, Archie Panjabi and Will Patton. Paramount Vantage, 2007. R. 100 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

When discussing British director Michael Winterbottom (*Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*), it's helpful to consider Steven Soderbergh (*Traffic*, *Out of Sight*), to whom Winterbottom bears some resemblance. Despite their relative youth — 46 and 44, respectively — both men already have large bodies of work that are notable first for their social commentary, but also for their sheer *variety*. Comical, historical, sci-fi, fantasy: Neither director ever met a genre he didn't like. (Consider that Soderbergh directed both *Kafka* and *Erin Brockovich*, and you're starting to get the idea.) Call it recklessness or confidence, or director's ADHD, but such a style isn't fit for, say, *The Cider House Rules*, a project Winterbottom declined, not to mention *Quiz Show*, which Soderbergh was approached to direct. The world might be a different place if Steven Soderbergh had directed *Quiz Show*. At least for Rob Morrow.

This restless approach to filmmaking isn't without some mistakes. *A Mighty Heart* isn't a mistake, exactly, not when it contains such a stirring performance by Angelina Jolie. But the film is a good deal flatter than it should be. In the film, Mariane (Jolie) and Daniel Pearl (Dan Futterman) are married journalists soon to depart violent Pakistan for the relative peace of Dubai. Daniel, an American, is employed by the *Wall Street Journal*. Mariane, French, is five months pregnant. As anyone who was old enough to read in 2002 knows, Daniel Pearl was kidnapped and eventually beheaded by his captors, an event later circulated on videotape. *A*

*Mighty Heart* is about the coordinated (or not so coordinated) efforts to save Danny's life, and, when that failed, how Mariane came to accept her grief.

One of the strengths of *A Mighty Heart* is Winterbottom's ability to convey information while whisking us around the streets of Karachi, usually inside a taxi. The opening scenes in particular are highly assured, reminding me of the opening moments of Michael Mann's *The Insider* (which opens in the streets of Lebanon). Following the kidnapping, Daniel is not seen alive again, appearing to us only in flashback. Nor are the contents of the videotape ever shown. But the occasional interruptions of a younger, happier Daniel only underscore the fact that for long stretches, *A Mighty Heart* is a mere police procedural. Using the Pearl residence as headquarters, various agencies reveal and confront their limitations, which Mariane suffers with dignity. But eventually the cycle of raid-arrest-debrief feels stilted and overmanaged. At one point, the entire story is going into and out of cell phones. The phone chatter is information, nothing more, and to my mind a little disorienting.

What saves *A Mighty Heart* from being merely average is Jolie. The story doesn't allow Mariane to do much more than suffer with great dignity and then react when dignity is no longer possible. But Jolie holds the picture together amidst the chaos, keeping Mariane solid and upbeat until, faced with the truth, she completely breaks apart. It's not a big performance, but I appreciated it more for that, given Jolie's ubiquitous presence in the media. Her restraint in *A Mighty Heart* is both welcome and appropriate. It's a courageous feat befitting the strength of the widow upon whose remarkable story *A Mighty Heart* is based. **EW**



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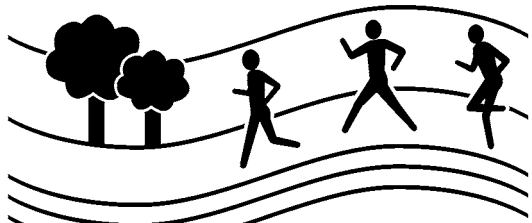
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