



Snow Falling on Nazis

Winter in Wartime a solid piece of Dutch filmmaking

The story is so familiar by now, so routine in its real horrors, that it's become one of film's bedrock set pieces, a background strung through with all manner of emotional intensities and dramatic dynamics: The telescopic upheaval of a world at war and the focused fissures of a Nazi-occupied homeland, against which are projected the shadowy minutiae of romantic and filial conflict. Love, honor, loyalty, betrayal — this is Casablanca's "hill of beans," though Bogart's famous lament is rhetorically wry. Without the supposed inconsequentiality of Rick, Ilsa and Victor's wartime ménage a trios, what would we have? Jackboots, passports and roulette wheels. War is there to amplify what is all-too-human, to bitter-sweeten the narrative pot and bring into relief what it will always and forever mean to live and love and lose. So it has ever been, really, from Homer's *Iliad* to *Casablanca* to *Winter in Wartime* (*Oorlogswinter*), an award-winning 2008 film by Dutch director Martin Koolhoven, finally arrived on these shores thanks to the distribution arm of Sony Pictures Classics.

Winter in Wartime opens with a plane crash and ends with a bullet in the back. What happens in between — reduced to its barest essentials — is a coming-of-age story about a young boy, Michiel (Marijn Lakemeier), whose rite of passage is abrupt and brutal, and nothing short of a spiritual trial whose sentence could prove lethal. The time is 1945, and Michiel's father (Raymond Thiry) is mayor of a small Dutch town overrun with Nazis; in the boy's rebellious reckoning, his father is much too lenient in his dealings with the German officers and, at worst, Mayor van Beusekom's laughing and chumming with the Nazis is tantamount to betrayal. Michiel — already put on edge by the arrest and execution of his friend's older brother — sees nothing politic in his father's maintenance of the status quo. He sees only cowardice.

With the unexpected arrival of Uncle Ben (Yorick van Wageningen), secretly in contact with the local resistance, the boy finds a foil to his father's apparent spinelessness. Michiel also finds in Uncle

Ben a confidant with whom he can share a secret of his own: That plane crash had a survivor, a British paratrooper named Jack (Jamie Campbell Bower) who killed a Nazi patrol and is now hiding in a bunker in the woods outside town. Michiel's sister, Erica (Melody Klaver), is a nurse; she tends to Jack in his dugout, and falls for him. Suddenly, in Kafka-esque fashion, the mayor is arrested and executed, right before Michiel's eyes and despite Uncle Ben's intervention. From here, the myriad strands of intrigue begin to cinch, precipitously; the plot doesn't thicken, it knots up.

Winter in Wartime is the sort of movie that would make Danish director Lars von Trier throw up in his mouth. This ain't no Dogme 95. Which is to say, as a work of cinematic art, *Winter in Wartime* is so classical in structure and style that it's almost atavistic, a throwback to the pre-auteur studio days: The soundtrack is soaring and emotionally swollen; the story is protean and predictably booby-trapped, with the narrative arc of a suspension bridge; the characters are broadly drawn and generically charming; the camera tells you what to see. There are some fine details — such as the crucial moment when Michiel removes the clacking card from his bike spokes so as to move in silence — but, altogether, no new ground is broken.

And, you know what? It all works wonderfully. Be it old-fashioned or even ham-fisted, the movie succeeds admirably as an engaging, suspenseful, funny, touching Bildungsroman, albeit a familiar one set in a time and place as well-trod as John Ford's Monument Valley. There is something to be said for a film that hits all the right notes, ringing our bell at just the right moments and in a rhythm that satisfies the most archetypal desire to be carried away by a solidly told story. *Winter in Wartime*, which was shortlisted for a Best Foreign Language Film Oscar, isn't the best movie you'll see this year, but in the canard that is this summer's blockbuster season, it's one hill of beans worth your while. **EW**

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