



The Slightly Peckish Games

Panem comes solidly to life

THE HUNGER GAMES: Directed by Gary Ross. Screenplay by Gary Ross, Billy Ray and Suzanne Collins, based on Collins' novel. Cinematography, Tom Stern. Editors, Christopher S. Capp, Stephen Mirrione, Juliette Welfling. Music, James Newton Howard. Starring Jennifer Lawrence, Josh Hutcherson, Liam Hemsworth, Woody Harrelson, Lenny Kravitz and Elizabeth Banks. Lionsgate, 2012. PG-13. 142 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

The *Hunger Games* is a solid piece of entertainment about kids being forced to kill other kids for the amusement of a corrupt elite. I put it so bluntly because the movie, based on the novel by Suzanne Collins, would prefer that you think it's about a smart, tough girl who beats the system at its own hideous game. It does a careful dance of having its cake and eating it too, presenting a horrible idea

and then shying away from placing blame for the horrors at the feet of a complacent and disconnected society.

That's not us, right? We're Katniss (Jennifer Lawrence), the capable, quietly rebellious 16-year-old who volunteers to take her little sister's place in the Hunger Games. The Games are the tool of the Capitol, the seat of power in the nation of Panem, which rose from the ashes of a shattered North America. Every year, two kids from each of the nation's twelve districts are chosen as "Tributes." They're sent to the Capitol, prettied up, given a bit of training and dropped into an arena, where they fight to the death under the watchful eyes of countless cameras, like *Survivor* with a body count.

Other than a too-generous dose of handheld camera action, which succeeds only in drawing attention to itself, the movie *looks* fantastic, from Katniss' trademark braid to the luxurious Capitol apartments to the golden eyeliner on Cinna (Lenny Kravitz), Katniss' sympathetic stylist. Kravitz, like the rest of the supporting cast, is excellent, but the film rests on Jennifer Lawrence's shoulders. She carries it confidently, and while I wished the film could get a little more into Katniss' head, Lawrence has the physical presence required to make Katniss a convincing survivor.

Collins' novel is told in Katniss' voice; we see only what she sees. Gary Ross' film expands this, giving us the Gamemakers in their space-age control room (and under the

thumb of Donald Sutherland's President Snow); gaudy Capitol commentators who provide context and explanation; and shots of the Games' audience, staring up at huge screens. It's an excellent opportunity to heighten the sense that the Games are reality television, with a carefully structured narrative and Tributes cast as heroes and villains. To a degree, this works, but without the immediacy of Katniss' narration, there's less tension between her growing fury at the Capitol's game and her knowledge that survival means playing it as best she can.

The horror of *The Hunger Games* resides not just in the Games themselves but in the way they mirror Katniss' daily struggle to survive in her poor mining district — it's the same struggle, bloodied up and broadcast as kicks for the rich. But rarely does the film convincingly supply this sense of horror. At times, the screenplay is too faithful to the book, and things that worked when seen from Katniss' perspective now seem too pat, the outcome inevitable.

The problem isn't that Ross' adaptation is a fairly bloodless PG-13; he knows how to stage a shocking death. It's something that runs deeper and is harder to pin down. This *Hunger Games* feels safe: Its heroine's sharp edges are filed down, and its indictment of a willfully oblivious society hides under the Capitol's garish costumes and affected laughter. *The Hunger Games* isn't willing to trust our investment in Katniss' story and risk making us uncomfortable about what we watch unquestioningly, or what horrors we ignore in order to live as we please. It's here to entertain, and it does just that. **EW**



In Darkness

The Oscar-nominated Polish film *In Darkness* truly resides in darkness. There is the dank, flickering dimness of the sewer system where a small group of Polish Jews hides after their ghetto is murderously hollowed out by Nazis; there's the looming shadow cast by the city worker upon whom this starving, hunted group is forced to place its tenuous trust; and overwhelming everything is the black hole of the Holocaust, extinguishing every glimmer of human hope.

Directed by Agnieszka Holland and based on the actual heroics of Poldek Socha, a Polish sewer worker in the former city of Lwow, *In Darkness* is a gritty, claustrophobic suspense story that rarely trades complexity and ambiguity for the easy stuff of Spielbergian uplift. The movie is nearly bloodless, but

its violence is profound and crushing.

Too often, it is our very sense of drear moral obligation that causes us to shy away from films like this, and yes, *In Darkness* is a jarring journey into the inconceivable terror of Nazism and all it says about our humanity. So was *Casablanca*.

The strength of *In Darkness* is its unflinching eye for detail (a body falling past a window in the distance) and its capacity to engage our senses in the immediacy of the action. For the most part, its characters are fully fleshed, and treachery and weakness — especially of the carnal kind — are not the exclusive domain of evil cardboard Nazis. This is a gripping, soulful film that earns its cathartic moments the hard way, with honesty and guts. — *Rick Levin*

In Darkness opens Friday, March 30, at Bijou Cinemas.

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