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Courageous Discourse



Barbara Sukowa stars as Hannah Arendt, a visionary thinker who had the courage to rigorously examine and express her perspectives on the evils of Nazism. PHOTO CREDIT BY ZEITGUST FILMS

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE
DARLEEN ORTEGA



Hannah Arendt's riveting search for the truth

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

I'll confess, I went to see "Hannah Arendt" during its brief Portland theatrical run last summer with only the vaguest notion about its subject and with no real expectation of being moved or entertained. I knew that Arendt was a philosopher and political theorist of some note and that her writing was of historical importance, so I saw an opportunity to further my education. A film about a philosopher was not destined to be riveting.

But riveted I was, and quite inspired. How often does one get the chance to see a film whose subject is a middle-aged woman in a supportive and connected long-term marriage, who is a visionary thinker with the

courage to rigorously examine hard questions and to express and then hold to her perspective on those questions, even in the face of withering criticism?

It took a group of strong women -- including German feminist writer-director Margerethe Von Trotta, co-writer Pamela Katz, and producer Bettina Brokemper -- to recognize the dramatic potential in Arendt's story and bring it to life. They studied Arendt's body of work and biographical works about her, as well as reading her letters and interviewing those who knew her, anxious to capture the sense of her significance as a thinker but also her character as a woman, lover, and friend.

Arendt had a dramatic life -- she was a Jew born and educated in Germany who fled to Paris in 1933 as the National Socialist Party was gaining prominence, then was briefly interned in the infamous Gurs detention camp before escaping to the U.S. -- but the filmmakers did not want to make a typical biopic that attempts to capture all her life's major events. They ultimately chose to focus on a four-year period, a decade after Arendt had achieved prominence as a writer, thinker, and teacher in the U.S., when she produced some of her most enduring and controversial work.

In 1961, Arendt traveled to Israel to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann for the New Yorker. She had sought the assignment out of a keen interest in understanding what had driven Eichmann to become such an important architect of the Nazis' deportation of European Jews to the death camps. The film uses actual footage of Eichmann's testimony to show what inspired Arendt to write a series of articles and, eventually, a book explaining her now-famous theory of the "banality of evil."

In Arendt's view, acts of terrific evil may and often do arise not from malevolent design but from an abdication of the human responsibility to think critically. Eichmann's testimony and demeanor demonstrated a piteous quality of small-mindedness, characterized by persistent invocation of hierarchies and the claim that in all of his actions, leading to the death of millions, he was merely following orders. Arendt's work in response to the trial addressed the pivotal importance of critical thinking, the courage and intention that critical thinking requires, and the devastating potential of a failure to do so.

For many people grappling to understand and, indeed, to distance themselves from the enormity of the evils perpetrated by the Nazis, Arendt's theories were not only challenging but deeply offensive. Arendt particularly angered the Jewish community by including in her analysis observations about the role that Jewish leaders had played in

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