



SARAH'S KEY

France

2011

Directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner
Screenplay by Serge Joncour

Gilles Paquet-Brenner

Based on the novel by Tatiana de Rosnay

Photographed by Pascal Ridao

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CAST

Kristin Scott-Thomas	Julia Jarmond
Mélusine Mayance	Sarah Starzyński
Nils Arestrup	Jules Dufaune

PLEASE NOTE: The screening on *IN DARKNESS* on Tuesday, 9th April will begin at 7.30pm and will be followed by a Q & A session with relatives of the survivors.

French cinema since the end of WW2 has, at recurrent intervals, provided interpretations of the nation's past as a way of processing it and thereby constructing a sense of national identity. The Occupation and colonisation/de-colonisation have been the major issues which have troubled the nation and these have been taken up by film makers who have offered differing ways of viewing these events. Some have been critical, others have provided more comfortable, almost nostalgic views of history. Some films, like Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974) or Ophüls' *Le chagrin et le pitié* (1969) have been deemed so beyond the pale that, in the former case Malle felt obliged to counter his negative view of the French under occupation, where it is clearly shown how Jews and resistance leaders were denounced to the authorities by ordinary citizens, by presenting the heart-warming and heroic acts of the Catholic church in saving Jews in *Au revoir les enfants* (1987). In the case of Ophüls, his film which documented the grim facts of collaboration was simply not screened on TV, where it had been intended, and instead was given only very limited exhibition in a few select cinemas. The nation, it seemed, was not ready to accept the documented truths of collaboration with the occupying Nazi regime. History is one of the elements which shape a nation's sense of itself and it is frequently difficult to come to terms with crimes committed in one's name. Haneke's *Hidden (Caché)* shows how repressed guilt can work on the collective psyche.

The incident upon which *Sarah's Key* is based is the infamous rounding up by French police of over 13,000 Jews in Paris in 1942 and crowding them into the Vélodrome d'hiver to await transit to the camps. It was a shocking act which staggered even the Nazi occupiers who were not prepared for such large numbers of men women and even children. It has been a blot on the nation's conscience ever since people discovered the truth about what happened. The director, Paquet-Brenner, had a Jewish grandfather who died in Majdanek and he says that he always felt that he would want to make a Holocaust film. When he read Tatiana de Rosnay's novel, he knew that this had to be it. Coincidentally, when he approached Kristin Scott-Thomas to play the lead role he discovered that through her marriage to her French husband (they are now divorced) she had half-Jewish children and was very keen to take on the role. For both of them it was the opportunity to view the incident from a modern perspective which appealed to them.

The way in which the film has framed the central narrative, with the modern Julia trying to find out the truth about how her family became implicated and then having to come to terms with what they did, enables the director to take his French audience on the same journey – gently and non-threateningly, but nonetheless being compelled to confront the stark facts of the French collusion with the holocaust. The scenes of the round-up

and the herding into the vélodrome are impeccable in their sense of period and direct in their impact. Low lighting and hand held cameras take us right into the middle of the teeming crowds as they are attacked with hoses and children are wrenched from their mothers, and all the time we are not allowed to forget that these are French police who are carrying out this terrible crime.

How different then, when we come to the modern Julia's search for Sarah's story in all this turmoil. Here there is a danger of Julia's situation (her marital difficulties and desire for a child) taking precedence over what happened to Sarah and her brother. What IS interesting about Julia is how her research and digging into the past gradually reveal the story which her father-in-law had hidden for years and how this impacts upon the family. Her desire to find out what happened to Sarah is also absorbing, but somehow the film's pace slackens in these sections and the film loses its immediacy. As a result it is slightly uneven. Nonetheless, Kristin Scott-Thomas' delicate handling of her role ensures that the film never drifts into melodrama.

In its exploration of the impact of the past upon the present and in its gradual revelation of uncomfortable events which sit uneasily with the self-image of the nation as brave resistance fighters, the film serves as a sombre reminder that anti-semitism was not invented by Hitler and genocide is not the prerogative of any single country.

Jill Dimmock

NEXT SCREENINGS:

Tuesday 26 March

Tuesday 9 April

8pm

7.30pm

Las Acacias

In Darkness