



In Darkness

Polish/German/Canadian 2011

Director: Agnieszka Holland

Written by: David F Shamoon

(adapted from Robert Marshall's book "In the Sewers of Lvov")

Cinematographer: Jolanta Dylewska

Running time: 145 mins

Agnieszka Holland began her career in the 1970's working with Andrzej Wajda and Krzysztof Zanussi. She has divided her time between Eastern Europe and the West including the States. Her work in the US has ranged from "Washington Square" to directing episodes of "The Wire." Her European work has encompassed film and TV including episodes of "The Killing."

In Darkness tells the story of a group of Polish Jews who hid in the Lvov sewers as the inhabitants of the city ghetto were being liquidated. Their survival ultimately depends on the assistance of Socha, a sewer worker and petty thief, who is also a cynical business opportunist and no lover of Jews. His initial arrangement to hide them for money slowly evolves into something else as the film progresses and his experiences in the world above and below ground affect his conscience.

Reviews of this film have on the whole been more favourable in Europe than in the States. In fact Roger Ebert could see no point in the film being made at all, feeling that "Schindler's List" had said it all and done it much better! Even here Time Out commented "Much as we may not want to admit it, it's easy to feel one's compassion flagging at the prospect of another Holocaust drama. The imperative of remembrance is always with us, yet somehow the visual iconography remains both daunting and over familiar, presenting a not inconsiderable challenge for anyone trying to persuade us there's still something fresh to say."

Holland's approach is to bring together the two themes of "Kanal" and "Schindler's List". She had already tackled the Holocaust theme in an earlier film "Europa Europa". In this film the "darkness" of the title is both the physical darkness underground and the darkness of the soul and moral values. We are watching a hell above and below the earth as groups prey on each other. Peter Bradshaw in The Guardian commented "The horrors of hell however are being overwhelmingly visited on the just, whilst the unjust walk around in airy freedom."

The physical darkness of the action underground obviously presented a considerable technical challenge to the cinematographer, who has to convey both the claustrophobia and the rat infested filth of the sewer whilst ensuring that we can see what is going on and work out who everyone is. A first viewing of the film does lead to some confusion on this score. Viewers who can understand the mixture of languages used – Polish, German, Ukrainian and Yiddish will find it easier! The palette of black on black could also be increasingly oppressive to watch so Holland makes recurrent visits to the daylight world.

The character of Socha, played flawlessly by Robert Wieckiewicz, seems at first sight an unlikely hero, but this is in line with the unsanctimonious approach to both the Jewish group and the opportunistic Poles. The Jews argue amongst themselves, lie to each other and do not feel that Poles are trustworthy. Above ground Socha finds he has to accommodate the conflicting demands of his former Ukrainian colleague, the need to protect his own family and the alternating fears and compassion of his wife.

There are the occasional film clichés but on the whole these either relax the mood or as with the scene in which Socha's daughter potentially gives the game away, the tension is successfully heightened.

At 145 minutes it is a long film and at a first viewing may be a demanding one. However at a time when xenophobic tendencies are once again emerging, (did they ever really go away?), it is a timely reminder of both horror and hope that the least likely of us is capable of compassion.

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