Paying attention to—or ignoring—big events: In Darkness and Salmon Fishing in the Yemen

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11 April 2012

In Darkness, *directed by Agnieszka Holland, screenplay by David F. Shamoon, based on the book by Robert Marshall*; Salmon Fishing in the Yemen, *directed by Lasse Hallström, screenplay by Simon Beaufoy, based on the novel by Paul Torday*

In Darkness chronicles the harrowing story of Polish Jews who hid for 14 months, until the end of the war, in the sewers of the then-Polish city of Lvov. Based on a book by Robert Marshall that compiled memoirs of the survivors, veteran Polish director Agnieszka Holland's gripping film dramatizes the plight of a band of Jews who escaped into the network of tunnels in 1943, enduring, with the help of a sewer worker, the waste, darkness and despair.

Leopold Socha (the remarkable Polish actor Robert Wieckiewicz) is an inspector in Lvov's sewers. He struggles to support his family in the German-occupied city, supplementing his meager income with petty thievery and stashing the loot in the underground sewer system. The Nazi liquidation of the Lvov ghetto offers Socha and his friend Szczepek (Krzysztof Skonieczny) a broader field for their unsavory operations. In addition, a former Ukrainian jail-mate of Socha's who is now a Nazi enforcer wants to partner with the sewer worker to earn cash by hunting down Jews in the underground waterways.

After discovering a group of Jews who have already found refuge in the tunnels, Socha initially agrees to help them for money, and later, for more altruistic reasons. Among the exiles is Mundek Margulies (Benno Fürmann), a suspicious man who nonetheless encourages the others, including men, women and children, to follow Socha into safer parts of the system.

The film shows the immense pressures on Socha and his family to evade scrutiny above ground, as well as the shocking fight for survival among his charges below ground. Holland brings out the complexities of people in unbearable settings, both their nobility and failings. Many of the Jews die, some falling into the sewer's waters and others from sheer exhaustion. A baby is born and murdered by its despondent mother. There are quarreling factions and threats at gunpoint.

When the Nazis are defeated, those of "Socha's Jews" who emerge from their cavernous hell are emaciated and near-blind. Movingly, they are aided by the townspeople, including Socha's wife Wanda.

In Darkness is an intrepid effort by Holland who is best known for features such as *Europa, Europa* (1990) and *Washington Square* (1997). She has also directed several episodes of HBO's *The Wire* and *Treme*.

As the director explains in the movie's production notes, one of the biggest challenges in filming was contending with the darkness of the sewer setting. The Jews "live in the dark, stink, wet and isolation for over a year. We knew we had to express it, to explore this underground world in a very special, realistic, human and intricate way. We wanted the audience to have the sensual feeling of being there. And to maintain tension as the viewer slowly becomes attached to the story."

Illuminating the underground scenes almost entirely by flashlight, the filmmakers created a suffocating, subterranean environment for a viewing audience 99.9 percent of which "has never been in a sewer," according to editor Michal Czarnecki. Portraying people who are trying to hang onto some thread of humanity in the indescribable filth, among rats and vermin, was a dramatic feat for the actors. The sudden flooding of the sewers due to a rainstorm is one of the film's most terrifying moments.

When the Jews finally crawl out of the sewer, the

audience has shared with the film's characters something of a visceral experience with Nazi terror. Actor Wieckiewicz's performance as Socha, but many other leads, such as Fürmann, Maria Schrader as a Jewish mother of two small children and Kinga Preis as Socha's wife, amplify the film's realism. Adding to the project's complicated logistics was the use of six different languages and one dialect—Polish, Yiddish, German, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Russian and Balak (which is a dialect of Polish spoken in Lvov at the time).

All concerned in the production of *In Darkness* exerted a colossal effort in rendering this bleak historic episode. The desire by filmmakers to continue to expose the Holocaust is entirely legitimate and necessary. But it must be said that the individual journeys and attendant moral choices, such as those in *In Darkness*, have a built-in limitation.

It is a much more difficult task for artists to analyze the social and political circumstances that gave rise to a state dedicated to such horror. Relatively few filmmakers, such as Luchino Visconti with his 1969 masterpiece *The Damned*, have attempted a serious artistic analysis of *the rise of* fascism.

Salmon Fishing in the Yemen

Swedish-born director Lasse Hallström has been making English-language films since the early 1990s, including *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, *The Cider House Rules*, *Chocolat* and *Casanova*.

In general, his work (including the earlier *My Life as a Dog*, made in Sweden in 1985) has been rather inoffensive, albeit well-intentioned. While eschewing the great issues of the day, Hallström has exhibited a certain sensitivity to the mildly marginalized, preaching his brand of tolerance, but with increasing toothlessness.

With his latest movie, *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*, one wonders if the director is seriously paying attention to anything going on in the world. The title pretty much sums up the story. A Yemeni sheikh (Amr Waked) is a "visionary" and avid fly fisherman who wants to bring salmon fishing—and irrigation—to his desert country. A billionaire with unlimited funds and an ancient Scottish castle, the sheikh hatches his plan with the aid of a British investment firm consultant (Emily Blunt) and UK government fisheries scientist (Ewan McGregor). The film's predictable and formulaic outcome is signaled early on.

Kristin Scott Thomas as the press secretary for the office of the prime minister provides a few comic moments as the irrepressible seeker of an Anglo-Arab "good news story." In general, however, Hallström wants the viewer to leave his or her brain outside the theater. Among the many things the viewer should forget or ignore is that Britain was a colonial power in southern Yemen from 1839 and only left, in the face of massive popular opposition, in 1967.

Moreover, there is the ongoing crisis in Yemen, which one would think might have come in for some consideration in the making of the film. The Great Powers, led by the US, along with the reactionary Gulf monarchies and various bourgeois factions in Yemen, are currently engaged in a ferocious effort to block a popular revolution from below, an event that would threaten to spread beyond the country's borders and challenge their imperialist grip throughout the Arabian peninsula.

Only in Hallström's fantasies does there exist a Middle Eastern country where poor people are undetectable (in reality, Yemen is one of the most impoverished countries in the region), and where a few nefarious terrorists stand in for a population painted as organically suspicious and resistant to progress—the latter being organized, of course, by an enlightened monarch and his benevolent backers in the British government and financial houses.

So corseted is the film by a false political reality, that even its instances of light-hearted humor—and the charm of its cast—are difficult to swallow. Hallström's trademark liberal wishful thinking has this time landed him in murky waters.