

22 July

How do you frame an “entertainment” about one of the century’s most horrific terrorist incidents? The incident is the slaughter of 77 people, mostly students, on July 22, 2011, by Norwegian right-wing fanatic Anders Behring Breivik, and the film about his rampage, made by English director Paul Greengrass (“United 93,” “Captain Phillips”), is a thoughtful, compelling depiction of the crime and its aftermath.

“22 July” comes in roughly three chapters: the massacre, the legal setting, and Breivik’s trial. For the killings—a combination of a pipe bomb in downtown Oslo, followed by the shooting of 69 people at a Workers’ Youth League meeting on the island of Utøya—there is little build-up; Greengrass shows us the killer getting down to business, performing his murders efficiently and chillingly (but with no lingering blood or horror). While Breivik roams the island, we follow a second protagonist, Vihar Hanssen (Jonas Strand Gravli), a leader of the youth group, who is shown being hunted down like a deer, receiving five bullet wounds, and being left for dead.

The second portion treats both the legal machinations of Breivik’s case, including the assignment of a reluctant defense lawyer Geir Lippestad (Jon Øigarden) and the Norwegian government’s reaction to the rampage. The attorney’s earnest attempts to get through to his fanatic client prove fruitless as Breivik’s only spouts his delusional political theories. Intercut with these scenes are the struggles of the injured Vihar to first survive then overcome his multiple disabilities.

The trial completes the story, the case resting on a possible insanity defense and whether Vihar himself will be able to testify. The film’s climax is his testimony.

Overall, the film, though long, convinces. All the lead performances are superb, especially Gravli’s, showing Vihar’s wrenching rehabilitation and composed strength. Greengrass, known for his stunning use of the hand-held mobile camera, shows he still has his stuff in that regard with the opening, all tick-tock, quick-cut scenes, and the relentless shooting spree on the island. Yet he can rightly slow it down when he gets to more controlled sequences, between lawyer and client, for example, or in the tense, almost aching, courtroom setting.

“22 July” is hardly just a disaster film or the glorification of a killer, but rather an attempt at depicting, attentively, an unspeakable act, and rendering the triumph of the human spirit in the wake of that act.

(One caveat: though “22 July” is about Norway and with a Norwegian cast, the film is entirely in English, a commercial decision that seems jarring but which eventually fades as the drama takes over.)

(The film, with a short run in theaters and now on Netflix, is rated “R” and runs 143 minutes).