

Defiance



A little-known, but amazing World War II story is told sturdily and well in *Defiance*, the latest from director Edward Zwick (*Blood Diamond*). Starring Daniel Craig (vacationing from James Bond), it tells of three Jewish peasant brothers in Belarus whose parents are slaughtered by the Nazis in 1941 and who decide to resist, holed up in the familiar forests of their region. Their

dogged commitment—and capacity to live off the land—attracts other persecuted Jews, and their secret camp eventually comes to encompass hundreds of furtive survivors.

The adult Bielski brothers are the thoughtful Tuvia and the tough Zus (pictured above, from left, Daniel Craig and Liev Schreiber), and the earnest young Asael (Jamie Bell). Tuvia, the eldest, is the natural leader of the camp and aims to sustain a viable Jewish community, while Zus, more belligerent, wants to launch a proactive challenge to the enemy. To that end, he leaves the camp to fight alongside rebel Russian elements, while Tuvia struggles, under great odds and harsh conditions, to keep his refugee group together.

This is fairly standard inspirational Hollywood fare, with the familiar rhythms of conflict and resolution between the brothers and within forces in the camp. There are also the obligatory love interests, the predictable villains, and the dramatic illness. Still, much of the narrative is stirring and well-choreographed, and the coarse woods context is nicely re-created.

The production was actually filmed in Lithuanian forests (not far from the current Belarus), and effectively shows on screen the legitimate camp travails in the snow, mud, and chill—all within a claustrophobia of trees. The movie covers one year in the life of this roving diaspora, showing how such an enterprise could not only survive but endure in these hardest of circumstances (the camp lasted until the end of the Russian war in 1944, and 1,200 Jews were saved, a rescue to match Oscar Schindler's).

Another positive element of *Defiance* is its wholly ensemble feel: Daniel Craig, while the lead here, is no “star.” Though he is surely first among equals, he does not dominate the story. Liev Schrieber is all tamped-down fury as Zus, and Jamie Bell is a poignant and human presence. For a stirring, though pro forma, war story invoking one aspect of an anti-Holocaust, *Defiance* will do.

(The film is rated “R” for violence and language; 137 mins.)

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