

## Divided We Fall

The line may be from our Revolutionary slogan but its context in a movie of the same name is far from that sentiment. *Divided We Fall*--a new Czech film--speaks instead of the solidarity that a couple must exhibit to save themselves, and a Jewish countryman, from the Third Reich.

The setting of the new film, directed by Jan Hřebejk from a script by Petr Jarchovský (both are long-time collaborators), is a small Czech town in the early 1940's, grudgingly getting used to Nazi occupation. Josef and Marie Cizek (Boleslav Polivka and Anna Sisková) are making do, barely, in their crowded apartment. Unable to have children, they cope, she long-suffering, he--a bit of a wastrel--feigning disability. Breaking into their lives at odd intervals is Horst Prohazka (Jaroslav Dušek), a local Nazi sympathizer and collaborator who is sweet on Marie and holds out the promise of benefits to the couple if they cooperate with him. Their modest lives are then thrown into a turmoil when David Wiener (Csongor Kassai), the son of the town's most prominent Jewish family, shows up after having escaped from a Polish concentration camp to ask for shelter. Josef, remembering good treatment he received from the Weiners before the war (he used to work for them), agrees to sequester the young man in a hidden closet.

The act is, however, no Anne Frank gesture; the Cizeks are just plain folks and feel panic from all sides, especially from the irritating Horst always sniffing around. To help cover the harboring of David, Josef even reluctantly agrees to work for the occupation forces. Worse, when the meddling Horst, upset at Marie's spurning him, wants a Nazi presence in the Cizek's house, the only way they can fend him off is to announce that Marie is--pregnant! Unfortunately, they have to make that statement stick--and Josef, they learn from a local physician, can only shoot blanks in the procreative department... What is to be done? Can poor David be enlisted into stud duty to keep them all from being discovered?

The above plot summary sounds like a mix of tense drama, social microcosm, and ribald farce, and it has, in fact, elements of all three. What is most distinctive about this tale is that--though it takes place within the great horrors of World War II--its handling is so offhanded and sneakily comic. Its protagonists are hardly noble paragons, but little people caught up in something they feel is too big for them. Polivka as a bluff, if affectionate Josef, and Sisková, as the demure, mildly cowed Marie, are trying to be decent folk in an indecent setting. It is as easy to identify with their plight as it is hard for us, as Americans, to fathom the world they've fallen prey to. I think the flavor of *Divided We Fall* also owes something to the gentle skepticism and unblinking honesty in much of Czech culture and sensibility. Sometimes the Big Issues are better addressed in hushed tones.

*(The film is rated PG-13 for an occasional subtitled swear word.)*

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