

Harrison's Flowers

Some decent films have tried to chronicle the harrowing Balkan struggles, films like *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997), *Beautiful People* (2000), and the current *No Man's Land*. Now another tries to capture the harshness of that world filtered through a contemporary love story.

Topnotch *Newsweek* photojournalist Harrison Lloyd (David Strathairn) has a devoted wife Sarah (Andie MacDowell), two sweet kids, an award-winner career, and a great home in New Jersey. There, in his private moments, he dotes on his orchid collection. He's tired of combat shoots but reluctantly takes on one last war assignment to Croatia. But it's 1991 and a skirmish has escalated into a war; Harrison is lost there and presumed dead when a building collapses around him. Sarah refuses to accept his loss and undertakes a dangerous, (perhaps) demented trek to the war zone to find him. She's saved and befriended by two other combat photographers, Kyle (Adrien Brody) and Stevenson (Brendan Gleeson), who are nonplused by her quest but admiring of her gumption. Going straight into the teeth of the fighting - and of the Serbia troops performing ethnic cleansing - they plough on with what looks like a futile search.

The opening of *Harrison's Flowers* - happy domesticity, exciting work, a good life - sets you up nicely for the war you are to experience, but nothing will prepare you for the first experience Sarah has when entering the then-Yugoslavia: driving a rented car from Graz, Austria, with a talky Croatian student who has hitched a ride at the airport, she gingerly passes an open border post with no one around. Then the car edges into a small town, and... all HELL breaks loose! The two are in a crossfire between the Serbian army and Croatian militia; their car is shot up and partly crushed by a tank; they wriggle out, only for the Croatian to be summarily shot in the head and Sarah slapped viciously across the face and thrown on a car hood to be immediately raped...

Only another piece of crossfire spares her, leaving Sarah crumpling to the ground in disbelief. Her mouth is as open and bereft of speech as yours will be witnessing this alarming sequence. Although the aforementioned journalists find her and shepherd her through the war zone, we are continually experiencing the war through her eyes, and its very rough trip. Made by French filmmaker Elie Chouraqui and filmed around Prague, *Harrison's Flowers* is horribly authentic in its look and in its shocking explosions of violence.

This is a film that is hard to recommend because, while it's so wrenchingly real (truly "war is hell" here), it is also an assault. Parallels to the recent *Black Hawk Down* could be made, and I think the war sequences are just as tough, with the difference being that in *Harrison's Flowers*, the protagonists are civilians, just as terrified, probably just as alienated, but, unlike soldiers, they are unable to strike back. For those with the stomach for it, it offers rewards in a gripping quest story well told. (*The film is rated "R" for very brutal and realistic violence.*)

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