

## Joyeux Noel

By the first winter of World War I, the lines of the Western Front in Belgium and France had hardened into grim trenches while the fighting stalled preparatory to a period called the "Christmas Truce." One vision of what happened to one group of soldiers in those trenches at that time is depicted in the new French film by Christian Carion called *Joyeux Noel* ("Merry Christmas") a most sympathetic look at a soft side of men in battle (*the film, in French, German, and English, opened March 24 at the E Street Cinema in Washington*).

*Joyeux Noel*, after some introductory scenes, gets us quickly to the stagnant battle field, where we witness a trio of antagonists. A French unit, led by a homesick young Lt. Andebert (Guillaume Canet), is dug in and dreading another order to advance. On their flank, a Scottish regiment, lead by Lt. Gordon (Alex Ferns), is under pressure from a senior officer, but its overall spirit is embodied by an earnest stretcher bearer, the Anglican priest Palmer (Gary Lewis), who feels responsible for young lads who've signed up for the fray. The German enemy trench is only yards away (in what appears to be French no-man's-land) and led by a non-nonsense Jewish officer Horstmayer (Daniel Brühl). Among the German infantrymen is one of Europe's great singers, the tenor Nicholas Spink (Benno Fürmann), who shares his fame with his Swedish soprano wife Anna Sorenson (Diana Kruger).

It's Christmas Eve and all the antagonists on both sides are already weary of war and thinking inevitably of home and its benign pleasures. Into this setting, the resourceful Anna wrangles a privileged pass to the front lines to see her husband. A Scottish bagpipe tune eventually triggers a musical mood which the tenor and his wife join, and the first tentative overtures are made from one warring group to another. The commanding officers tentatively feel each other out and then second the forgiving mood of their troops, leading eventually to a Christmas service between the trenches led by the priest, a mini-concert by the singers, some hearty soccer playing, and an agreement to bury each side's dead in no-man's-land on Christmas day. Eventually, of course, the momentum of war reasserts itself.

The above synopsis sounds ripe for sugary handling, and while *Joyeux Noel* is clearly sentimental, it is not saccharine. Mitigating the sugar is the fact that such fraternization actually happened during the period at various places along the 500-mile Western Front. Some of the unlikely events shown in the film--like the tenor's performance in the trenches--did take place, according to research undertaken by Mr. Carion, who wrote the screenplay based on a variety of sources. Moreover, the film, though showing the power of human connection, has an ending like a cold shower, as the contending authorities learn of the fraternization (principally through reading of troop's letters home from the front) and take disciplinary action against the participating regiments, for example, sending the German unit off to the murderous Eastern Front (in a chilly boxcar).

*Joyeux Noel* offers an unabashed salute to human brotherhood, an unvarnished look at the trenches, a varied collection of good performances, and a lovely vocal score by composer Philippe Rombi, who wrote most of Spink and Anna's music, which is sweetly sung by contemporary opera stars Natalie Dessay and Rolando Villazon. It gives us another version of diamonds in the rough.

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