

North Face

Mountain climbing is an occasional, but steady subject of movie makers, principally because of the built-in tension of the climb (with its potential for ecstatic triumph or frozen death) combined with the spectacular vistas of the mountains themselves.

Recent documentaries on mountain climbing have been compelling, like the TV shows based on Jon Krakauer's "Into Thin Air" or the wrenching "Touching the Void" (2003), set in the Peruvian Andes. However, in Hollywood efforts, the human drama overlaying the climbing footage can seem flaccid or dorky, witness examples like "Cliffhanger" (1993) or "Vertical Limit" (2000).

A new, and most vigorous, entry in this mini-genre, "North Face" (Nordwand in German) offers all the usual thrills of the climb (feet slipping on rocks, ropes twirling, pitons--those little metal spikes--popping, etc.), but it adds a more human dimension in a naturalistic depiction of the climbers themselves. Made in Germany, the film tells the true story of an unheralded team of young mountaineers who dared to take on the "Murder Wall," the sheer north face of the Eiger mountain in the Swiss Alps.

The time is 1936, and Nazi propagandists, prepping for the Berlin Olympics that summer, are looking for German heroes to scale the unconquered North Face. Two stalwart Bavarian climbers, Toni (Benno Fürmann) and Andi (Florian Lukas) are soldiers but willing to leave their Mountain Brigade to take on the challenge, though for personal reasons rather than for national glory. They are urged on in their effort by childhood friend, Luise (Johanna Wokalek), who works as a secretary for a Berlin newspaper promoting the scaling effort.

While tourists and press gather in mid-July at a luxury hotel in the shadow of the Eiger, Luise nabs a gig as a rookie photographer on assignment with her boss, the crass Henry Arau (Ulrich Tukur). Toni and Andi, bivouacked with other alpinists, are, along with an Austrian team, the first to take the challenge. Ominously, the weather on the temperamental mountain sours, and both teams combine for a chance to advance. The entire second half of the film vividly contrasts the forbidding situation of the climbers with the shiny serenity of the hotel and its tuxedoed denizens.

The final struggle of the climbers is—take your pick: gut-wrenching, nerve-wracking, nail-biting cinema.

"North Face" gains enormous verisimilitude by being photographed on location at the Eiger site. Adding to that sense of the real are the numerous careful details of the climb: the ropes, the gear, the clothing layers, the steady blizzard conditions, the feel of rock, dirt, ice, and numbing cold. These effects make the switching to the hotel scenes the more effective, as we see languid swells exchanging bon mots and ironies over champagne and steaks.

The acting for a film of such physical demands may not require superlative performances, but it evidences sound ones. The leads, studly Fürmann and bouncy Lukas, are just fine in their contrasting roles as, respectively, the careful technician and the bubbly free spirit. Wokalek, as bashful but loyal Luise, has more to do as the buddy of Andi and the closet lover of Toni. A very nice turn comes from Tukur as the cynical

journalist; he is fast gaining credentials as a great character actor, having also appeared in the magnificent “The Lives of Others” (2007) and the upcoming “The White Ribbon.”

Though it takes place during the heyday of the Nazi’s consolidation of power, “North Face” does not overemphasize the loaded political element. In fact, it is soft-pedaled (perhaps too much for some). An example is the ease with which Toni and Andi, who are uniformed members of the Army’s Mountain Brigades, simply give up their military roles to take up the Eiger climb. If anything, the two fellows are played as small-town rustics, inexperienced in everything except their climbing knowledge. The film, directed by Philipp Stolzl, could have played up facile, ominous portents of the Nazi future to come (an American version surely would have), but it keeps these at bay, and I think that approach—rather than being naïve about 1930s political life—is the right tone.

Maybe in this season of record DC snowfall, it is hard to even consider a film which can chill your bones, but if you want a gripping, heart-pounding adventure based on real human traits—rather than special effects—take a tour of the “North Face.”
(Running time is 121 minutes. The film is not rated but contains nothing objectionable except a couple of German oaths.)

(March 2010)