

The Grey Zone

Admittedly, most folks go to the movies for distraction, entertainment, to “forget about their troubles.” For those among you, however, who are looking for something more demanding, something that takes an unblinking look at people in crisis, something that is tough going but leaves you with a true emotional catharsis...if you are up for this, a new movie, *The Grey Zone*, can afford you real drama based on real events.

The Grey Zone is, yes, another Holocaust film... Do we need another Holocaust film? If it effectively reinvokes that historical catastrophe for purposes of catharsis and remembrance, I think so, and director-writer Tim Blake Nelson’s new film achieves that. He takes us into a part of the Holocaust little explored on film, a world which picks up where *Schindler’s List* and *Sophie’s Choice* left off. The “grey zone” of the picture is the world of the *Sonderkommando*, the “special units” of Jewish prisoners chosen by the Nazis to help exterminate their fellow Jews. These were people placed in an excruciating moral dilemma, readying prisoners for the gas chamber and disposing of their corpses in exchange for relatively posh camp privileges--and a few more months of life.

Nelson (better known as an actor, best remembered as the simple-minded yokel in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*) sets his story, based on real events, in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in the fall of 1944, where a group of Hungarian Jews of the 12th *Sonderkommando* is, amid bickering and resentments, planning a rebellion by blowing up one of the camp’s gas chambers. Their deed does not mean escape for the plotters, for they will surely be executed after the act, but represents for them an act of justice mingled with revenge and rage. The one lingering symbol of their ravaged humanity is a young woman who miraculously survives the gas chamber, serving as a kind of talisman whom the inmates try to protect and save.

Nelson, who earlier wrote an off-Broadway play using the same material, shot his film in Bulgaria but used American actors for most principal roles. He deliberately had them deliver their lines in their own voices, without imposing accents, giving a flatter, simpler tone to the dialogue which takes some getting used to. After all, can you see the usually giddy David Arquette as a troubled Hungarian Jew? Silly as this may sound, it comes off because of the director’s utter seriousness, and the historical weight the picture carries. The actors, even Arquette, acquit themselves well, among them an almost unrecognizable Mira Sorvino, who plays a frail munitions worker who helps smuggle gunpowder to the plotters--and later suffers a trauma fully as abominable as the above-mentioned Sophie. British actor Allan Corduner makes his mark, too, as the puzzled, chilly Dr. Miklos Nyiszli, a real figure in the camp who ran experiments on Jews for Dr. Josef Mengele and who wrote an eyewitness account of his Auschwitz experience on which Nelson based his screenplay. One weakness, however, is the casting of Harvey Keitel (who helped get the picture produced) as another historical figure, Oberscharführer Muhsfeldt, an official in charge of one crematorium; here Keitel’s funky German accent and his too-American demeanor just don’t work.

Tim Blake Nelson said he got the seed of the idea for *The Grey Zone* from reading a Primo Levi essay on the *Sonderkommando*. It appears he has aimed at achieving something of Levi’s dispassionate account of the ultimate horror. By his shooting in tight quarters, with committed actors, with realistically raw dialogue, and with

minimal music, he has managed to tell his horrific story by plumbing the victim's sense of panic and fear while totally avoiding any easy or cloying sentiment. *The Grey Zone* doesn't make you cry, but it makes you face the worst in man.

(The film is rated "R" because it takes place in a death camp...)

(November 2002)