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The Pianist

Abstract

This is a review of *The Pianist* (2002).

At the world premiere of *The Pianist* in Warsaw, several months after it received the Palme d'Or at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival, Roman Polanski confessed that he had declined Steven Spielberg's initial offer to direct *Schindler's List* because the subject matter was too close to home: the setting of that film, Cracow, was where Polanski himself had survived the Holocaust. Ultimately, the story of Wladyslaw Szpilman's survival in Warsaw, as told in *The Pianist*, was more attractive to Polanski, as Szpilman's account gave him the chance to tell a very personal story at a slight remove, allowing for greater objectivity. Objectivity is a key word here, and the style of *The Pianist* is subordinated to achieving this end. Polanski noted that his intent was to allow the story to tell itself: no directorial tricks such as shaky camera work or pseudo-documentary effects through extensive use of black and white film. *The Pianist* conveys cinematic directness and emotional candor.

The hero of the biopic is certainly more suitable to Polanski's temperament than Oscar Schindler; although by no means a negative character, he is not the hero that the protagonist of Spielberg's film becomes. Aside from his virtuosity as a pianist - obviously a key, but not the only one, to his survival - Szpilman is not endowed with a particularly exceptional character. Polanski avoids all extremes in presenting his hero, creating a remarkably believable depiction of an unbelievable,

yet very real, plight. We watch Szpilman humiliated, but he never loses his humanity.

Befitting the story of a musician, *The Pianist* has a number of movements: initially we follow the protagonist's story from the outbreak of the war to the establishment of the Warsaw Ghetto; next is the horror of ghetto life up until Szpilman's escape, including the deportation of his family to a death camp; then a relatively static series of interiors follows where the protagonist is caged in the hideouts provided by Polish hosts who risked their lives on his account. The crescendo is reached when Szpilman lands in the lion's den itself, i.e., Warsaw sans a Polish population after the tragic Warsaw uprising that motivated the city's vengeful and unimaginable destruction by the Nazi occupiers. Help for Szpilman comes from the most unlikely source: a Nazi officer involved in that rearguard action discovers the Polish Jew and, upon hearing him play, decides to help the musician survive the couple of weeks before the inevitable arrival of the Red Army from the East.

Music provides the framework and heart of the story. In the opening sequence the sonata played by a defiant Szpilman during a recording session symbolizes the height of European civilization. The musician defends this civilization by playing on as the bombs fall ever closer, finally hitting the very recording studio in which he plays. At the end of the film Szpilman returns to a

remarkably similar studio, also in Warsaw, and a few moments later we leave him in a concert hall, where the music serves as a requiem for those Jews and Poles and Germans - we have just learned that Szpilman was unable to save the officer that helped him, and subsequently fell into the hands of the Red Army - who died in the tragic war.

One of the more moving scenes in the film comes when the musician approaches a piano in an apartment hideout. He has been warned not to make a sound since the danger of an informer is very real. Szpilman sits at the piano, the camera cuts to his face and we hear a wondrous sonata. The viewer wonders, has the protagonist cracked under pressure? The following close-up of his hands hovering ever so slightly above the keys explains that he is playing the piece in his mind. The scene eloquently demonstrates what Viktor E. Frankl writes about so stirringly in *Man's Search for Meaning*, that survival in such extreme circumstances was something more than a mere biological affair; it was crucial to find meaning in the sea of absurdity. Earlier in the film music was a mere instrument of survival, for example when Szpilman played in one of the Ghetto bars. Here, music, or rather its shadow, became a means of maintaining his sanity.

During the confrontation with the Nazi, a dumbfounded Szpilman asks why the former had saved him. The officer takes no credit for himself, somewhat cautiously proffering instead that God has meant for him to survive. The answer

jars not only with the status of its proclaimer, but also with all the atrocities witnessed in the film. Earlier Polanski films stack the arguments against any such explanation: in *The Pianist* the answer is uncertain, but the possibility is at least entertained. And perhaps this is proof of Polanski attaining the highest measure of objectivity in this impressive film: all sides of the major questions involved are treated in earnest, avoiding particular biases.

For some of us, part of God's purpose in saving Szpilman seems evidenced in the very power of the story he alone could tell; a story which under Polanski's capable retelling commemorates those who died, as much as it celebrates the protagonist's survival.