

Movie Review: 'A Mighty Heart'

by David_Elliott

"A Mighty Heart" uneasily pops a question beyond (and also below) the timely issues that it mostly raises well: How far should a real-life tragedy become the pedestal for a brand-name movie star?

'A MIGHTY HEART' - 'A Mighty Heart,' starring Angelina Jolie and Daniel Fütterman, is based on the real-life kidnapping and murder of journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan, and what his wife went through in trying to save him. CNS Photo courtesy of Peter Mountain.

This is not like Nicolas Cage sweating through fireman heroics in "World Trade Center," which went from stunning start to fairly generic survival drama. No, this is Angelina Jolie as Mariane Pearl, wife and then widow of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, gruesomely beheaded (Feb. 1, 2002) in Karachi, Pakistan, by jihadi fanatics.

Using Mariane Pearl's memoir as the main source, Michael Winterbottom's often brilliantly entrenched film takes us into the crucible. Seeking to meet a radical leader, Pearl was abducted only months after the 9/11 disaster in a part of the world inflamed by American troops in Afghanistan and Pakistan's likely, covert linkages to terrorists (Pakistani's president later suggested that Pearl was slain by a British agent).

Earnest and appealing Dan Fütterman plays Daniel Pearl, more than symbolically if not in depth of detail. The movie pivots on Mariane's shocked response to his absence, then the long days and nights waiting to discern his status, and the efforts of American and Pakistani agencies to track down the culprits.

So it is really her story, with Daniel a decent pawn of fate (and a bit too idealistic? He was poking into possible linkages of Pakistan's top intelligence agency to al-Qaeda). We find that Mariane is a Buddhist, but Daniel was a nonpracticing Jew, which in this maze of terror paranoia made him, to his captors, an "agent of Zionism against Islam."

Winterbottom creates a vital, almost choking feel of danger in a city of dense poverty and hellish traffic. The whiteboard on which Mariane writes suspect names and presumed lines of connection, with her charming assistant (Archie Panjabi), becomes a crowded microcosm of the webs of intrigue outside.

This is not "Casablanca," but living nightmare. An American agent (Will Patton) tries to be a jaunty CIA spook about the madness, but the better face of fearful truth is the top Pakistani investigator, acted superbly by Irfan Khan (the father in "The Namesake"). He is a driven man, not above torturing suspects, but not remote from the human depths of his situation.

There is the almost documentary immersion Winterbottom achieved in his great, never rhetorical saga of Afghani refugees, "In This World." Moments of tension quicken almost unbearably, and no one is immune (the crowds are like nerves multiplied).

And then there is Jolie, the almost weekly cover girl of countless tabs. This film might not have been made without her. Jolie is dedicated and has an OK accent, even if the belly of pregnancy seems to accessorize her very slim body. She gets some time not looking entirely fabulous. Still, the film keeps returning to her face. She has most of the cruncher lines. She wows kids and startles cops. She becomes less the widow Pearl than our new, bone-chic Mother Courage.

RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) So an agonized chapter of recent history has become a star vehicle. The birth of Mariane's baby (which we see, plus flashbacks to Mariane's lovely wedding) must, of course, shine upon our time the light of better days.

(Those interested in getting more of the factual matrix might look at "The Journalist and the Jihadi," a DVD coming from HBO Documentary Films).

A Paramount Vantage release. Director: Michael Winterbottom. Writer: John Orloff. Cast: Angelina Jolie, Dan Futterman, Irfan Khan, Archie Panjabi, Will Patton. Running time: 1 hour, 47 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

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