The most dangerous game

‘Enemy at the Gates’ a superb war drama despite subplot excess

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“Enemy at the Gates” heads up a rather fully loaded year for World War II movies – it’s the first of four films releasing over the next nine months that sets its story against the backdrop of the greatest conflict of the modern era. Coming in may, the Jerry Bruckheimer / Michael Bay mega-opus “Pearl Harbor,” followed in August by director John Madden’s (“Shakespeare in Love”) WWII romance “Captain Corelli’s Mandolin,” and November will see MGM bow the John Woo-direct-ed WWII drama “Windtalkers.”

With such a glut of WWII films this year, the European-produced “Enemy at the Gates” faces the grim prospect of being forgotten if only because of subject-matter overload – a shame re ally, since director Jean-Jacques Annaud has crafted a superb drama / thriller with this movie. It may not pack the emotional punch of “Saving Private Ryan,” or boast the bombastic production values of “Pearl Harbor” (already receiving plenty of attention thanks to the films two massive trailers), but it definitely excels by virtue of its taught storytelling and Annaud’s staggering attention to detail.

Red army soldier Vassili Zaitsev (Jude Law) provides the locus for this film, set against the backdrop of Nazi Germany’s sixth-month siege on Stalingrad in late 1942-early 1943. He’s destined for greatness later on, but when he arrives amongst a trail of fresh soldiers to the field of battle early in the movie, he’s just another body thrown against the German war machine by the desperate and debilitated Russian forces – they’re in such bad shape that they can only afford one rifle for every two soldiers, the understanding being when the armed soldier is killed, the unarmed one will take up the available weapon... Annaud films the opening battle with a eye towards hard-hitting realism and sheer terror.

The result is a stunning sequence effectively conveying the confusion, chaos, and violence a soldier would experi ence in such a situation – the frightened conscripts cross the Volga in tightly-packed boats, while commanders barks orders through megaphones and German warplanes strafe them from above, only to engage in a suicide charge against a German encampment, where half of them are cut down by enemy fire, and the other half shot by Russian commanders to prevent them from fleeing.

Young Vassili manages to survive the massacre, and, amidst the corpses of the fallen Russian soldiers, en counters political officer Danilov (Joseph Fiennes), fle ening from German patrols. Danilov wishes to provide a hero to inspire the demoralized army, which he believes he’s found in Vassili when the young peasant from the Urals skillfully shoots five German officers at long range from a concealed position. Thanks to Danilov’s propa ganda, Vassili’s feat spreads across the country and he embodies a source of national inspiration. Promoted to sniper division, Vassili becomes the pride and joy of Danilov and Stalingrad army commander Nikolai Kr uschev (Bob Hoskins) as the young marksman takes out dozens of German officers over the following months. With Vassili’s growing fame and mounting kills under mining the German effort, the Nazi leadership sends Major Konig (Ed Harris), an experienced soldier and the best sharpshooter in German army, to eliminate the So viet’s rising star. Further complicating matters is the presence of Tania (Rachel Weisz), a female soldier who wins the affections of both Vassili and Danilov.

General Konig’s arrival hits a turning point in the movie – up till then, the film depicts Vassili’s actions in the greater context of the Soviet cause. With the intro duction of Konig, the backdrop of the epic battle recedes and the film focuses on the duel between the two snipers – for them, the war becomes intensely personal, beyond motivations of national pride or glory. Konig is driven by a unswerving professionalism and dedication, to the army for certain but in a greater sense to his own skill and pride. Vassili displays a lack of confidence in his own abilities when faced with going up against the skilled German marksman, yet is driven forth by the need to live up to what Soviet propaganda has built him up to.

Kониг and Vassili’s duel plays out wonderfully in the second act, and the sniper sequences that highlight this conflict are stunningly staged. From the beginning of the film, Annaud draws attention to the city itself, reduced to bombed-out buildings, charred edifices, and heaps of rubble. Of course, such attention proves necessary since Stalingrad’s devastated landscape becomes the hunting ground for the two snipers later on. Annaud crafts some remarkable set pieces by allowing the char acters total interaction with their surroundings – the ruins of the city provide plenty of places for the two snipers to hide sight-unseen from their targets – and by using the setting to full effect in creating tension. Sometimes he likes to trick the audience or only give a hint to the presence of one of the snipers – one sequence has Vassili startled by a dead soldier on a catwalk that looks like he’s aiming a gun directly at him. Another memo rable scene is a trap set by Konig for Vassili in a bomberd-out department store – we’re only aware of the major’s presence through a series of point-of-view shots as he surveys the interior of the store. Meanwhile, Annaud heightens the dramatic tension even further when a squadron of German bombers approaches, and Vassili must face either being blown up or being shot if he moves. The cat-and-mouse game continues in grand style later in the film in a factory, a chemical plant, and a train yard.

Annaud displays such astonishing direction in these sequences with Konig and Vassili, the film really has no need for plot-padding. Unfortunately, the director, who also co-wrote the movie, betrays a lack of confidence in the film’s admittedly lean, but nevertheless engaging film’s concept concerning the two sharpshooters by adding on a romantic subplot that, while not totally detracting, does at times create an unfortunate diversion from the far more intriguing central conflict, and an unnecessary source of confusion for the motives of Danilov and Vas sili. While I certainly wouldn’t label the romance as tacked on, I do wish Annaud had trimmed it somewhat in order to focus more on the snipers’ duel.

Many critics complained about Annaud’s film lacking a substantive and complex story, yet I think “Enemy at the Gates” works best when not bogged down by multi ple plot layers. It’s rather unfortunate that the movie diverges from its outstanding story of the two snipers, because Annaud clearly knows how to direct and get the most out of it – perhaps he would have benefited from the knowledge that sometimes “less is more.” Still, “Enemy at the Gates” is as an outstanding WWII drama, certainly one of the best films so far this year. It looks as though “Pearl Harbor” may have a lot to live up to.

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Seven Days...

Friday, March 23rd

Eve 6, Tzar, and VAST at Avalon, Boston
At Will, Eastside, Eyehategod, Hypnotic Kick, Jiggle, Keelhaul, Scud, and Strangefolk at The Palladium, Worcester
All The Queens Men, Count Zero, and Mistle Thrush at Lilli’s, Somerville
Deep Banana Blackout, Original P, and Superhoney at Orpheum Theatre, Boston

Saturday, March 24th

Sugar Ray & The Bluetones at Gilrein’s, Worcester
Entrain at Tammany Hall, Worcester
Chuck Rainey at Johnny D’s, Somerville

Sunday, March 25th

Lagwagon and The Ataris at Axis, Boston
Paco de Lucia at Orpheum Theatre, Boston

Monday, March 26th

Young Fresh Fellows and The Soft Boys at Paradise Rock Club, Boston
Texas Terri & The Stiff Ones at Middle East Club, Cambridge

Tuesday, March 27th

Sarah Brightman at the FleetCenter, Boston
Ween at Avalon, Boston

Wednesday, March 28th

Sex Mob at Lilli’s, Somerville
Enemymine and The Rapture at Middle East Club, Cambridge

Thursday, March 29th

Stimulant at Lucky Dog, Worcester
Ato at Worcester State College, Worcester
The Nighthawks at House of Blues, Cambridge