

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Angelina Jolie

Marko Attila Hoare

Angelina Jolie's directorial debut, *In the Land of Blood and Honey*, is difficult to watch. Difficult to watch in the sense that, here in the UK, it hasn't been released, and there doesn't appear to be any information about when or where it will be – certainly not on the movie's official website, nor in any of the reviews that have appeared in UK newspapers. I spent the first three days of this week in Washington DC, where I found that the film was no longer playing in that city either, and that Amazon.com would not sell me the download since my debit card had a UK address. I have now managed to see the film – unfortunately, only the English-language version – via a link posted by a friend on Facebook.

In the Land of Blood and Honey's unavailability for viewing is odd, considering the widespread publicity it has received, the controversy that has surrounded it and the fame and popularity of the director. But not odd, when you consider that it violates just about every principle of Hollywood film-making, and that if everyone as famous as Jolie were to make their films like this, it would amount to a global cultural revolution. It is difficult to express just how surprising it is to watch a film about an inter-ethnic love story in time of conflict that makes no concession to either cinematic or romantic cliché. Apparently, mainstream global audiences can only be fed films like *Dances with Wolves*, involving the standard American hero and almost complete absence of ambiguity or nuance; or *Monster's Ball*, involving a boringly predictable romance for which themes of racism are mere window-dressing; or *Avatar*, with its vomit-inducing, patronising liberal gushing over imagined noble savages.

In the Land of Blood and Honey is not like any of these. The film centres on a relationship, in a Serb concentration-camp during the Bosnian war of 1992-1995, between a Bosniak woman-prisoner and a Serb military captain. This much is known to anyone who has followed the controversy surrounding the film, whose production in Bosnia was halted for a while due to local complaints that it romanticised the relationship between Serb rapists and Bosniak women prisoners. In fact – and this review contains no spoilers – the relationship portrayed here is not the cliché of true love in the face of adversity. Nor is it lurid, pornographic or sado-masochistic. In fact, it is convincing in its portrayal of what such a relationship in such circumstances might actually be like, involving as it does a fledgling romance that was interrupted by the outbreak of war, then resumed under very different circumstances in the concentration camp. The film brutally portrays the enforced tension between, on the

one hand, the genuine attraction and emotional affinity between the two main characters, Ajla and Danijel – portrayed respectively by Zana Marjanovic and Goran Kostic – and the obscene imbalance of power between them. The relationship is alternately, indeed simultaneously touching and menacing. Whereas Ajla's attraction to Danijel is unambiguous, her sexual consent is not; the genuine tenderness of the love scenes occurs only in the context of her absolute lack of choice in the matter and terrifying dependency on him for her survival. Meanwhile, the conflicted, unstable Danijel veers between chivalry and brutality, keeping the viewer guessing right to the last minute as to how the love-story and the film will end.

Jolie has avoided the annoying habit of Hollywood movies – and indeed movies generally – of sparing audiences uncomfortable ethical confusion by making the involved rights and wrongs safely black-and-white, so that heroes are implausibly noble and villains implausibly wicked. Neither has she spared the audience anything, in terms of depicting the horrors of the Bosnian war; the systematic rape, killing and humiliation of Bosniaks are vividly shown. Nor does her heroine, Ajla, get off lightly (in the long-established tradition epitomised by Captain Kirk, who is always spared serious violence or humiliation no matter how many expendable officers of the USS Enterprise are bumped off on strange planets). This is taut, harrowing viewing, made all the more so by the plot's sheer unpredictability.

Nor, however, are the horrors and violence portrayed here of the comic-book, caricatured variety. Inevitably, this film has come under fire from the Great Serb, genocide-denying lobby for supposedly being 'anti-Serb', and portraying 'the Serbs' as monsters. Well, it is 'anti-Serb' in the same way that films like *Schindler's List* or *The Pianist* are 'anti-German'. In fact, Danijel is far from an unambiguous villain in the vein of Amon Goeth, the psychopathic camp-commander in *Schindler's List*, who also falls in love with one of his camp inmates. Nor is he a noble, romantic hero trapped on the wrong side of a conflict – far from it. The ambiguity of his character is one of the film's great strengths; the emotional and ethical dilemmas he faces convey realistically the dilemma faced by many ordinary Serbs who were not a priori extreme nationalists or Muslim-haters, but became complicit in the genocide nonetheless. But because he is the protagonist of the film, the viewer, too, becomes complicit in the dilemmas and ambiguities surrounding him; when he goes into battle with Bosnian Army soldiers, our sympathies are divided. We do not know whether he can or should trust Ajla, or more to the point, whether she should trust and be loyal to him. The thin line between closeness and enmity across the ethnic and military divide that forms the theme of many films about the Bosnian war – *No Man's Land*, *Lepa sela lepo gore* – has never been more harshly depicted than it is here.

Likewise, the cruelty of the Serb soldiers and guards is portrayed graphically but realistically – in a manner that compares favourably, for example, with the caricatured evil of the Vietcong guerrillas in *The Deer Hunter*, or of the IRA guerrillas in *The Crying Game*. The realism of this portrayal is more comparable to that of the portrayal of Italian-American mafiosi in *The Sopranos*, or of high-ranking Nazis in *Downfall* or in *Conspiracy* – evil neither caricatured nor prettified, but humanised.

In fact, one of the strengths of Jolie's film is that it portrays the cruelty of the Serb soldiers and guards not as stemming from any supposed inherent wickedness of Serbs

as people, but rather from the systematic, institutionalised policy of persecution and killing that actually took place; she shows that this was an organised genocide. Furthermore, without any pretence of moral equivalency between Serb perpetrators and Bosniak victims, the film nevertheless permits the Serb ethnic-cleansers to present their own viewpoint – above all through the mouth of Danijel’s father, General Nebojsa Vukojevic, portrayed by the veteran Croatian Serb actor Rade Serbedzija.

Herein lies one of the film’s few – minor – flaws: though Serbedzija’s performance, like those of the other stars, is excellent, a couple of the little speeches his character gives that serve to illustrate the Serb-nationalist viewpoint sound somewhat unrealistic. Thus, early in the film, General Vukojevic tells his son of the Serbs’ historic heroism in resisting and defeating first the Ottomans, then the Austro-Hungarians, then the Nazis – it is part of the nationalist-historical catechism that Serbs are indeed likely to relate to Western visitors, but a general would be unlikely to feel the need to tell something so elementary to a captain. Likewise, toward the end of the film, General Vukojevic tells his troops that they will, like Prince Lazar – the legendary Serb hero of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo – reject the earthly kingdom in favour of the heavenly kingdom, and refuse to negotiate their own climb-down with the international community; though this self-destructive, bloody-minded mentality has indeed been a characteristic of contemporary Serb nationalism, it is unlikely that a Serb general would have vocalised it quite so explicitly.

Another wrong note is struck by the church building that appears toward the end of the film; actually located in Budapest, where much of the filming occurred, it looks out of place in Bosnia. Finally, in the English-language version of the film at least, there simply isn’t enough swearing to make the dialogue sound entirely authentic.

That said, Jolie clearly bothered to study the war properly, and avoids the clichés about it as successfully as she avoids general cinematic clichés. So the film is not patronising; it does not depict Bosnia, its people or its war – as is so often the case in Western portrayals – as colourful but ridiculous; they are not seen through the eyes of some well-meaning but ignorant and self-important foreign visitor. Indeed, it is refreshing to watch a film about Bosnia in which there are no Western or international characters whatsoever.

As indicated above, *In the Land of Blood and Honey* has fallen afoul both of Bosniaks who wrongly jumped to the conclusion that it was misrepresenting or sanitising the Serb forces’ rape and ethnic cleansing, and of Serb nationalists who have equally wrongly labelled it as ‘anti-Serb’. But perhaps the most powerful constituency that it has offended is the smug, sexist constituency that feels threatened by the possibility that a young, attractive female superstar might produce a film so intelligent, hard-hitting and technically near-flawless. Well, she has. This is a splendid film; possibly the best yet made about the Bosnian war. It should be watched and appreciated even by those not specially interested in the subject.

© 2012 Marko Hoare

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.