

A Czech 'Cold Mountain'

MORTON MARCUS - SENTINEL correspondent
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WHAT: 'Zelary.'

RATED: R: Violence, some sexual content.

WHERE: The Nickelodeon, 426-7500.

LENGTH: 2 hours, 30 minutes.

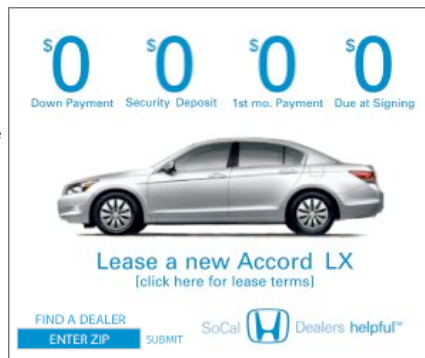
VERDICT: A.

By MORTON MARCUS SENTINEL correspondent

What if Nicole Kidman's character in "Cold Mountain" was played by a Czech actress, and instead of our Civil War, the film was about World War II in Czechoslovakia?

In that case, the film might look like "Zelary," which opens today at the Nickelodeon. "Zelary," one of last year's Academy Award nominees for Best Foreign Film, is what "Cold Mountain" wanted to be but wasn't.

The similarities between the films are striking. Both are based on books. "Cold Mountain" was fiction, however, and "Zelary" was a true occurrence. Both films are told against the background of war, both are love stories, both are about women exploring their power, both take place in a remote area where community is the reflection of the world in microcosm, and both are epics — tales of national origins.



Even "Zelary's" story is similar to "Cold Mountain's." Eliska, a sophisticated city dweller — a nurse with hopes of being a doctor before the occupying Nazis close the schools — is also a courier for the Czech resistance during World War II. When the Nazis uncover her group, she is forced to flee into the Czechoslovakian hinterland with a patient whose life she saved by giving him a blood transfusion.

Thrown together by circumstance, she and the patient, an older man named Joza, find a deep and touching love, while at the same time Eliska discovers a new meaning in life among the tradition-bound populace of Zelary, a remote mountain hamlet from which the film gets its title.

Although 2½ hours long, the film is gripping and beautifully shot in the Moravian mountains. Technically the film is straightforward. Director Ondrej Trojan concentrates on telling his tale, so the film contains no cinematic razzle-dazzle, no dizzying handheld camera work or barrage of edits which might disturb the viewer or distance him from the unfolding narrative. In fact, the camera glides among the characters and surveys the exquisite landscape at such a stately pace, Trojan's direction can be described — in a praiseworthy way — as old-fashioned. To him, the story is all-important because it serves a deeper symbolic purpose, and that is its epic subtext.

Epics are panoramic tales of the origins of nations, usually based on archetypal myths and traditional folkways and ideals. Although Czechoslovakia had been a nation before the Nazi occupation in WWII, it had emerged from under the 400-year rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire only since World War I, and therefore had existed for a mere 20 years when Hitler took over the country in 1939.

The epic subtext of "Zelary" is gracefully and unobtrusively worked. The mingling of Eliska's educated, "modern" blood with Joza's uneducated peasant blood in the transfusion scene is the symbolic joining of Czechoslovakia's new and old ways. Eliska's odyssey into the countryside is her discovery and embracing of fundamental Czech values, a point made clear not only by the stressing of the traditional rituals she must follow, but by the solidarity of the community's hiding and protecting her.

All in all, "Zelary" is as entertaining as it is uplifting, and as thought-provoking as it is emotionally engaging, especially its final sequence, whose bittersweet ending evokes more than it seems at first and is as relevant to America today as it is to the 7-year-old Czech Republic.

Morton Marcus — the co-host of the TV film review show "Cinema Scene," which airs Thursdays and Sundays on Channel 27 at 8:30 p.m. — will lead a free discussion on "Zelary" Saturday at 1:35 p.m. after an 11 a.m. showing of the film at the Nickelodeon.

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