

Morton Marcus: A Mighty Wind

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Critics are falling all over one another, extolling the virtues of "A Mighty Heart" Film of the year, many of them have proclaimed, adding that Angelina Jolie has turned in an Academy Award-winning performance. It no longer astonishes me that such a travesty of serious filmmaking elicits such gushing exclamations of praise: I long ago recognized the elements to which, time and again, my fellow critics fall prey.

First, it's the film's subject matter. The true story of the 2002 kidnapping and murder of journalist Daniel Pearl in Karachi, Pakistan, certainly is an emotional and heartbreaking story that addresses the horrors we've seen on TV news reports since 9/11. The film is based on the book, "A Mighty Heart," by Pearl's widow, Mariane, in which she not only describes the anguish she endured during and after the incident, but paints a rich picture of Pearl's character while, at the same time, inadvertently revealing herself to be courageous, thoughtful, and intelligent.

Unfortunately, the film's script writers as well as its director, Michael Winterbottom, have chosen to toss out the character study and Mariane's ruminations in favor of following the book's almost hour-by-hour unfolding of the search for Daniel, and thereby they have opted for a film that is little more than a Robert Ludlum thriller. Time and again, the viewer is shown Karachi from the inside of a car, as the characters speed through the streets of the city in search of Pearl and his captors. The film soon becomes a repetitious and macabre travelogue, replete with Pakistani security police and a CIA agent piling in and out of cars, rushing through alleyways and into buildings, breaking down doors, and hauling away suspects, while cell phones ring, doors slam, and men shout.

These rough-and-tumble scenes alternate with short sections showing Mariane in her Karachi apartment, taking phone calls, cooking, or being visited by the security agents who tell her of the search's progress. As Mariane, Angelina Jolie, sporting bronzed skin and black, ringleted hair, is statuesque and dignified, but she has little to work with in the way of acting. In fact, the viewer is soon waiting for the moment when she learns of Daniel's death and her calm exterior will crash in an agonized emotional outburst. Throughout most of the film, however, she is seen as the equivalent of a gracious hostess.

The tracking of Mariane's impending emotional explosion is the most despicable aspect of the film. There is something ghoulish about looking forward to her breakdown toward which, it is clear, the film is purposely building. In the end, "A Mighty Heart" moves from thriller to woman's film, that staple 1940s genre better known as the "weepee," which usually starred Barbara Stanwyck and Joan Crawford, and invited the female viewer to vicariously suffer along with the female protagonist in her melodramatic trials and tribulation — and maybe have a cathartic cry into the bargain.

Director Michael Winterbottom has shown a predilection for making socially significant films — "Welcome To Sarajevo," "24 Hour Party People," "The Road to Guantanamo" — but most of them have failed to achieve his vision for them. Unfortunately, "A Mighty Heart" is one of those failures.

Daniel and Mariane Pearl deserved more than this.

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