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New U.S. Release

In the Land of Blood and Honey

A ver es mez foldjen

By JUSTIN CHANG

Credits: A FilmDistrict release of a GK Films presentation and production. Produced by Angelina Jolie, Graham King, Tim Headington, Tim Moore. Executive producers, Holly Goline-Sadowski, Michael Vieira. Co-producer, Simon Crane. Directed, written by Angelina Jolie.

Ajla - Zana Marjanovic
Danijel - Goran Kostic
Nebojsa - Rade Serbedzija

Though sufficiently well made to suggest a viable career behind the camera for



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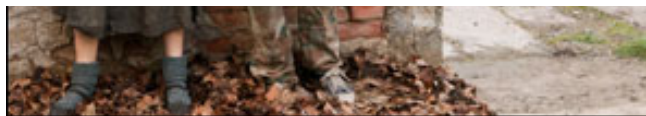


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debutante writer-director Angelina Jolie, "In the Land of Blood and Honey" seems to spring less from artistic conviction than from an over-earnest humanitarian impulse. Centered around the sexually charged bond between two people on different sides of the Bosnian War, this alternately disturbing and titillating picture reps a dramatically misguided attempt to renew public awareness of the 1992-95 Balkan conflict. Jolie's name and do-gooder cachet should lend the film a modest commercial profile, though its horrors-of-war hand-wringing will do little to challenge the apathy of the mainstream.



Zana Marjanovic, left, stars in FilmDistrict release "In the Land of Blood and Honey," set during the 1992-95 Bosnian War.

There have been a number of films made about Westerners caught up in war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina, including "Welcome to Sarajevo," "Behind Enemy Lines" and "The Hunting Party." Foregoing the customary narrative assist of an American or British outsider's perspective, Jolie plunges directly into a local story filmed with actors from the former Yugoslavia speaking the Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian language (an English-lingo version was also lensed for exhibition in other territories), a move that immediately signals the helmer's seriousness and lends the film a measure of cultural authenticity.

Yet that credibility doesn't extend to the particulars of the drama, which is too strenuously designed to make viewers cluck their tongues at the pointlessness and absurdity of any conflict along ethnic or religious lines. Opening titles inform us of how diverse Bosnia-Herzegovina used to be, with Muslims and Christians, Serbs and Croats coexisting peacefully before the outbreak of war in 1992, triggered by the republic's declaration of independence from Yugoslavia.

Sudden twists of fate are the script's chief structuring device. Ajla (Zana Marjanovic), an attractive Muslim artist living in Sarajevo, meets Serb cop Danijel (Goran Kostic) at a nightclub one evening, but their mutual attraction is waylaid by a bomb blast. Four months later, when the Yugoslav-backed Serb army occupies the city and begins a horrific campaign of ethnic cleansing, irony once more rears its head: Danijel, serving in the Serbian army, recognizes Ajla among the numerous prisoners, and saves her from being raped by another officer. (Another woman, we're shown in unsparing closeup, isn't so lucky.)

Over the following months, Danijel maintains an uneasily protective watch over Ajla, arranging private meetings in which she regards him with distrust and wary gratitude. Eventually Danijel installs her in her own private quarters where the two can make love and Ajla can paint in peace, away from the harassment and abuse of the other guards. This risky move arouses the suspicion of Gen. Nebojsa

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Vukojevich (Rade Serbedzija), who occasionally rationalizes his troops' actions (and slips the audience a historical cheat sheet) with lines like, "This land is soaked in Serb blood."

Another character more aptly pinpoints the film's theme by announcing, "People are not often what you think them to be." It's a bid for sympathy on behalf of Danijel, who, one is meant to believe, is a sensitive guy deep down, despite having been thrust into a position of murderous authority by his domineering dad. At times Danijel seems a somewhat more benign version of Ralph Fiennes' Nazi in "Schindler's List," testing the limits of his affection for his personal refugee/plaything while using the refugees scurrying below his window for target practice.

It would take an unusually sensitive touch to see the monster's inner humanity while still decrying the barbarism, or to turn a cross-cultural love story into a moral argument, and Jolie isn't quite there yet. At a certain point, the film almost seems to sense its scenario tilting into tarted-up banality and abruptly shifts gears, to shockingly blunt effect, yet the sudden pessimism feels as unearned as the earnest pleading.

The intimacy of Danijel and Aja's scenes together, mostly shot in a large, bare-walled room, lends the production (filmed in Hungary and Bosnia-Herzegovina) the feel of an arty chamber drama rather than a full-on war picture. The pic tries to counter this with occasional televised dispatches from the outside world (newsflash: the U.N. is useless), continual references to mostly offscreen atrocities and occasional scenes of large-scale battle and pursuit; these include an action-oriented subplot involving Aja's sister (Vanesa Glodjo) and a group of Muslim refugees. Jolie handles these logistically demanding scenes with grit and assurance, though there's a sense of overcalculation to some of the more disturbing images: a bullet whizzing out of nowhere to meet its target, or a besieged house going up in flames.

Thesps are fine but a bit colorless, and Marjanovic and Kostic don't seem entirely at home with their characters' fairly risible dynamic; Serbedzija, the cast's biggest name, also leaves its strongest impression. Gabriel Yared's score is tasteful.

Camera (color, Panavision widescreen), Dean Semler; editor, Patricia Rommel; music, Gabriel Yared; production designer, Jon Hutman; art director, Zsuzsa Borvendeg; set designers, Krisztina Szilagy, Laszlo Szirmai, Marton Voros; set decorator, Anna Lynch Robinson; costume designer, Gabriele Binder; sound (Datasat/SDDS/Dolby Digital), Mac Ruth; supervising sound editor, Becky Sullivan; re-recording mixers, Jon Taylor, Ben Wilkins; special effects supervisor, Gabor Kiszelly; visual effects supervisor, Robert Grasmere; visual effects, Tikibot; stunt coordinator, Gabor Piroch; associate producer, David Bernstein; second unit camera, Igor Meglic; casting, Gail Stevens. Reviewed at Aidikoff screening room, Dec. 2, 2011. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 126 MIN.

With: Branko Djuric, Vanesa Glodjo, Nikola Djuricko, Fedja Stukan, Alma Terzic, Jelena Jovanova, Ermin Bravo, Boris Ler, Goran Jevtic, Ermin Sijamija, Milos Timotijevic, Jasna Ornela Bery, Aleksandar Djurica, Dzana Pinjo. (Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian, English dialogue)



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