

SAVING PRIVATE RYAN

Directed by Steven Spielberg

Review by Christopher Johnson

The first and last two minutes of Steven Spielberg's new World War Two film *Saving Private Ryan* are so at odds with the rest of the picture in style, technical skill and emotional complexity that they appear to be tacked on by some studio-employed hack as a way of giving the film "context." They are totally unnecessary and mar what is otherwise a superb picture, perhaps the best Spielberg has ever made.

Spielberg has ruined otherwise perfectly good films before by trying to tie up their "messages" into neat little bundles - it's his Achilles heel. *Schindler's List* (1993) is forever flawed for me thanks to the "if only to save *one more Jew*" speech given to Liam Neeson at the end - which defied not only history but also the character of the man that the film had for three hours so brilliantly created. It's as though Spielberg is afraid we won't get it, or that he doesn't want us to discuss it - he'll render comment meaningless by providing it for us.

It's a shame, because the other 161 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* are truly great cinema and would work much better on their own without the offending "bookends." The story is minimal, but good. There are characters, and they're well defined, but they don't do much except react to their given circumstances. What there is, is pure, awesome, technique.

The situation is simply that three of four Ryan brothers have been killed in action, and the United States Army is determined, for Public Relations purposes, that the fourth boy is found and returned home alive (evidently based on a true occurrence.) Tom Hanks' Captain is told to select a squad and find the missing Private Ryan wherever he is in France. He does, and they do.

It's not even the way this story is told that is great about *Saving Private Ryan*. It's the way it is *assembled* - shot, edited, sound edited, constructed. The level of filmmaking expertise on show is amazing. Only someone with as much experience as Spielberg could possibly put together images and sounds of this complexity with as much competence and emotional texture as he does here - and there are very few with that much experience. The film seems at times an impossibility overcome - I just couldn't imagine how he did it.

Essentially the film is composed of four particular battle scenes - a beach invasion, an incident with a sniper, a counter-ambush, and the defence of a bridge. Each one is hyper-realistic (and therefore extremely and unrepentingly violent). Each one is a mini-lesson in the absolute horror of war. But the most remarkable thing about each one - particularly the fourth - is how in the midst of unbelievable chaos, Spielberg keeps things clear for the audience even as the characters hardly know what the hell is going on. The defence of the bridge - a full half-hour barrage of battle - is a masterpiece of staging. Somehow we in the audience know exactly what's going on even as we're terrified by the sudden appearance of another German soldier or tank.

These are the best battle scenes I've ever seen - even better than Kubrick's trench

assault in *Paths of Glory* (1957) or his sniper situation in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) though those come close; even better than Coppola's helicopter attack in *Apocalypse Now* (1980) though that was a one-sided annihilation rather than a depiction of the to-and-fro of battle; and better than the climactic battle of Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), to which it is perhaps most similar. But Stone's movie was too confusing; here we have chaos but never confusion.

There are other scenes in the movie - more traditional scenes, where characters actually talk to each other - but these are not what the film is about. Indeed, the "story" - no more than a situation, really - is not what the film is about. The film is about the ugliness and difficulty of war, and the dialogue scenes simply serve the battle scenes by letting us get to know the characters a little bit before we watch them fight for their lives.

Performances are very good throughout. Tom Hanks is very successful, against type, as a hard-core no-nonsense Captain. Unfortunately he has the film's most overwritten and overwrought speech and he doesn't do it convincingly (again, Spielberg hammering a message home where none was needed.) Tom Sizemore is terrific as his extremely tough Lieutenant. Edward Burns is all right, but his hair is too clean and his look too tidy. Better is Jeremy Davies as the scared-witless cartographer along for the mission against his own wishes; best of all is Barry Pepper as the crack sharpshooter of the company. His performance is so exciting that you have no doubt he will be carrying his own movies within a few years. It's an example of perfect casting. It's also the best role in the film.

Spielberg's approach to the German soldiers is complex and intelligent. Initially they are the invisible enemy - indeed, just bullets, raining down on the nameless Americans as they try to storm the beach. Then throughout the film they slowly and inevitably become visible, and visibly human. We see a close-up of the sniper, just briefly. Then, in the third and fourth battles of the movie, one of the Germans becomes a real, speaking character - we get to know him, and he develops a story. What happens to him represents perhaps the most emotionally risky narrative development Spielberg has ever presented. It left my guts twisted.

The unbearable irony and brilliant dramatic conceit of this approach to the Germans is that ultimately you are feeling the desperate need for the Americans to kill them - so you won't have to suffer the agony of watching one of these American characters you've grown to know die - while also being fully aware that ultimately the Germans are in exactly the same horrific boat as the characters this film has chosen to focus on. That there is ultimately, in some alternate universe, a *Saving Private Reinhold*.

Saving Private Ryan is a grueling and tiring film, because the horror, suspense, and emotional intensity rarely let up over its nearly three-hour running time. Despite Spielberg's occasional missteps, which inevitably involve sentimentality and over-clarification, it is a work of brilliance, and deserves to be seen for its devastating technical and emotional complexity. If it is extremely violent, that is only in the service of its powerful and realistic depiction of the extreme horror of war.