
Dark Blue World Review

A strong focus of this film is the aftermath of WWII and the Russian enslavement of the Eastern Bloc.

Dark Blue World

By Mark Adnum

I'm not sure why so many reviewers have compared screenwriter Zdenek Sverák's *Dark Blue World* to last year's *Pearl Harbour*, as the two films have nothing in common.

They both tell stories of love triangles in the Second World War, and feature battle sequences, but this is a superficial connection. If this is all it takes to connect both films, then they must also be compared to *From Here To Eternity*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and an endless list of others. The Second World War is a pretty big topic area.

Let's not be lazy: two films set in a similar time period, and featuring a romance, don't have to be compared to each other, especially when they are as different from each other as these.

A strong focus of the excellent *Dark Blue World* is on the aftermath of World War Two, specifically, Russian enslavement of what came to be called the Eastern Bloc, previously sophisticated and richly historic nations of Eastern Europe, whose subjugation by the Nazis was just the curtain raiser to many decades of misery. The main character, Frantisek Sláma (Ondrej Vetchy, who looks like De Niro, but acts a lot better) reflects on his memories from the infirmary of a Czech-housed Russian labour camp.

After the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia, a group of crack Czech pilots escaped to England, where they flew bombing raids with the RAF. Sláma was one of them, and, after the war, they were all promptly imprisoned by the Russians, who feared the pilots would stage a similar campaign against their occupation, too.

While in England, Sláma's flying partner and best friend, the young Karel (Krystof Hadek) falls in love with an British war widow. Problem is, when he introduces her to his friend, she falls in love with Sláma.

But this is merely narrative lubrication. This is not a love triangle film, just a film that features a love triangle, among many other things. For me, the film functioned as a lyrically educational film, a patriotic lament about an unsung corner of a country's history, in the style of *Farewell My Concubine* or *Breaker Morant*.

It also explores the value in doing something good, even if that deed dies under the weight of greater forces, like

nationalised fascism. The pilots' efforts are ultimately in vain: the Germans lose, the Russians arrive. But Sláma's memories sustain him even in his most dire moments inside the labour camp. His first-hand experiences of friendship, sacrifice, love and bravery act as emotional and psychological parachutes when his fate takes a mortal plunge.

Dark Blue World is lit up from within by an outstanding script. The story requires the film to be half in Czech, and half in English, but Zdenák Sverák demonstrates a rich, multi-dimensional creative vein in utilizing the presence of two languages to construct scenes that are intricate, innovative and perfect. In many dialogue-heavy scenes, one language tells one story, the other language tells another. When Karel comes to tell his new love of his passion, for example, she is busy looking for ointment to rub on a child's bee-stung arm, and, in any case, has all but forgotten about him. The intimacy they shared, for her at least, has gone out as quickly as it came in. While he chokes on his basic English, she finds what she's looking for, only to announce that "it's [the ointment's] evaporated". I can't remember a more effective and concise use of dialogue to illustrate a scene's subtext.

Almost every scene is structured this way, and as a result, the movie unfolds like a music album, one tight track after another.

Sverák places his wonderful criss-cross dialogue inside a flashback narrative, which moves us back and forth between Sláma's miserable incarceration and his haunting war memories, and redoubles the script's marvellous sense of balance.

Unlike some smarty-pants films like Being John Malkovich, or Memento, Dark Blue World is textured and intricate without ever being anally complex. Fittingly, for a richly emotional film about love and friendship.