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Land of Mine (15)

dir: **Martin Zandvliet**

Starring: **Roland Møller, Louis Hofmann**

Sponsor: **Special Edition Chocolate**

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Synopsis: Denmark, May 1945. Danish soldier Sgt Rasmussen is put in charge of a group of young German soldiers - mostly teenagers - captured after hostilities ended. They are employed as forced labour to clear thousands of land mines from Danish beaches before they can go home. Rasmussen has a violent dislike of Germans, after the Nazi occupation of his country. Conditions for the prisoners are poor and their training is rudimentary. There are casualties among the group but Rasmussen begins to recognise their bravery, especially when one of them rescues a little girl who strays into danger, and his attitude towards them starts to change. As they near the end of their mission, the survivors are told that they have to undertake an even more hazardous task. Rasmussen decides to intervene before they can be deployed and enables their return to Germany.

Martin Zandvliet's *Land of Mine* (the corny title can't be blamed on the original Danish title, *Under Sandet*, meaning 'Under the Sand') commemorates a discreditable episode in Danish history. From May to October 1945, after the Nazi occupation of Denmark had ended, German soldiers were set to clearing more than 1.5 million mines that had been laid under the beaches of West Jutland against the possibility of Allied invasion. This forced labour clearly contravened the Geneva Convention; Denmark, with British connivance, weaselled around it by classifying the soldiers as surrendered troops, not prisoners of war. Of the more than 2,000 Germans pressed into service as mine clearers - most of them teenagers who had been forced to join up in the dying days of the Third Reich - nearly half were killed or severely injured.

The action of the film concentrates on a dozen or so of these unfortunates, assigned to clear a specific beach under the command of a Danish army sergeant. There are parallels here with Bernhard Wicki's 1959 drama *The Bridge*, in which a group of 16-year olds are drafted and pointlessly sent to guard a strategic bridge as the Reich collapses around them. In *Land of Mine* though, it's Danish rather than Nazi German morality that's targeted: the only adult Danes we meet are, initially at any rate, vindictive in the extreme, while there's little of the strutting *Urbemensch* about their hapless, homesick young victims.

Zandvliet offsets the grimness of his story with the austere beauty of Jutland's North Sea coast, and its pale, translucent vistas are reflected in the plangent lyricism of Sune Martin's score. The film's chief weakness is a degree of predictability: we can guess almost from the start that Roland Møller's Sgt Carl Rasmussen, first seen viciously assaulting German prisoners and yelling abuse at them, will gradually come to feel an almost fatherly sympathy for his young charges; and that the cute blond child living in an isolated farmhouse by the mined beach will at some point stray into danger and need rescuing. And it seems almost a cinematic given that as the lead character has a dog he or she's devoted to, the poor animal is destined for a premature death before the movie's out.

These reservations apart, for most of its running time *Land of Mine* (which was nominated for an Oscar in 2017 for the Best Foreign Language Film) maintains its tensions with steely-eyed effectiveness. We can guess of course, that at least some of the young prisoners will be mutilated or killed in carrying out their butt-clenching task, but



barring the despairing, suicidal impulse of one character (which isn't hard to foresee) almost every explosion comes as a shock; - the last and most deadly one in particular. In the film's pivotal role, Møller convincingly negotiates Rasmussen's progressive change of heart, from his initial impulsive brutality to his gradual, reluctant adoption of a more caring attitude - all the more effective by contrast with the chilly sadism of his superior officer Capt Ebbe Jensen (Mikkel Boe Følsgaard, King Christian V11 in 2012's *A Royal Affair*. NB: shown by LFS)

Of the young Germans, they're not always so easy to differentiate one from the next, but there are telling performances from Louis Hofmann as Sebastian, slightly older than the rest of the group and thus something of a loner, but with a sense of responsibility towards his fellow captives; and Joel Basman as Helmut, contemptuously cynical as regards Rasmussen's promises of eventual freedom, yet despite himself developing a certain pride in his skill at the delicate task of mine-defusing. Most touching are the young twins Ernst and Werner (played by twin actors Emil and Oskar Belton), whose mutual interdependence makes them extra vulnerable.

Perhaps *Land of Mine*'s greatest strength is that, unlike so many supposed 'futility of war' films (*Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, *Saving Private Ryan*, etc), it totally eschews any element of visceral glamour. This is war (or rather, the sordid, bitter aftermath of war) devoid of excitement, heroics or adrenaline rush, let alone patriotic speeches or gestures; it's war as garbage disposal, at once lethal and monotonous. For this alone, Zandvliet's slightly too facile shot at a (relatively) happy ending can readily be forgiven.

Credits

Sgt Carl Rasmussen	Roland Møller
Capt Ebbe Jensen	Mikkel Boe Følsgaard
Sebastian Schumann	Louis Hofmann
Helmut orbach	Joel Basman
Ernst Lessner	Emil Belton
Werner Lessner	Oskar Belton
Ludwig Haffke	Oskar Bökelmann
Wilhelm Hahn	Leon Seidel
Karin	Laura Bro
Peter (soldier)	Mads Riisom
Elisabeth	Zoé Zandvliet
Director/Screenplay	Martin Zandvliet
Director of Photography	Camilla Hjelm Knudsen
Editors	Per Sandholt, Molly Malene Stensgaard
Music	Sune Martin
Sound design	Rasmus Winther Jensen
Production design	Gitte Malling
Costume	Stefanie Bieker
	Denmark/Germany 2015. 100 mins

20th.

Another View

There are few periods of history as well trodden by cinema as World War Two, but it's a tribute to the expansive legacy of the conflict that *Land of Mine* manages to unearth a fresh and fiercely captivating story. From Danish writer and director Martin Zandvliet, this is a curious tale of German POWs who are forced to remove mines from post-war Denmark's coast. It makes for a harrowing and earnest story, delivering an emotive reflection on the scars left by warfare.

Land of Mine looks at a broad historical event through eyes of a few wholly rounded characters, and to this end the film is superbly cast. A roll call of young German actors gives a strong impression that the prisoners are little more than confused and homesick boys. Indeed, politics is largely ignored in favour of a closer examination of comradeship and personal tragedy. The resulting drama is admittedly predictable and the tone often slips into dissonant melodrama, but the events are nevertheless rooted in a compelling study of individual survival amid government-orchestrated tragedy.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Land of Mine* deals liberally in sequences of beachside mine-clearing, which are consistently tense and occasionally horrifying. However, the emotional substance of the film is primarily found within the contradictory relationship that develops between the German POWs and their fierce Danish commandant, Sgt. Rasmussen (Roland Møller).

This plaintive subject matter is buttressed by cinematographer Camilla Hjelm Knudsen, who lends the image a cold and brutally realistic impression. These muted visuals are supported, and often elevated, by a wonderfully melancholic score from Sune Martin, which manages to mould a commendably dispiriting atmosphere.

Despite its achievements, *Land of Mine* is not without narrative pitfalls. A characteristic sequence features a German prisoner rescuing a Danish child from an active minefield, and this represents just one moment in which the film shifts into excessively sentimentalised overtones. Clearly, Zandvliet has something to say about the destructive nature of war, upon both the Danish landscape and the human soul. He may not deliver in the subtlest of terms, but the end result is an admirable chronicle of history and a convincing war drama.

Mark Allison: Little White Lies

Our net screening: Friday April 13th, 7.15pm Aquarius (France/Germany 2016. Cert 18)

Clara, a widowed music critic, lives as the last resident in the Aquarius building, a handsome period structure that is a feature of the Recife seafront. A development company wants to redevelop the Aquarius but Clara sees no need to accept any of the inducements she is offered to move out. As the developers raise the stake by applying pressure to make her change her mind, Clara becomes increasingly resistant to intimidation and starts to fight back. Director Kleber Mendonça Filho and star Sonia Braga create a vivid portrait an independent woman refusing to be cowed by the power of big business.

Please note the earlier start time

Programming news

Members will now be able to see the details of the 10 shortlisted films from our archive, from which one will be chosen for inclusion in next season's programme. Members will be eligible to vote throughout April.

The programming committee meets in early May to select the films for next season. We have already received a number of suggestions from members. The long list will close for nominations on April

Membership news

Membership of the Society for the new season will be available from May 14th.

Anyone wishing to join or renew should be aware that there will be a new procedure this year, affecting everyone. Changes in data protection rules mean that we now have to have individual permission for each person joining the Society to hold their data.

The committee has decided that the simplest way to achieve this is to rebuild the membership list from scratch. Once the list opens, registering as a member will be done online (though we will accept applications on paper this season from anyone without access to a computer).

Full details of membership rates for next season and the link to the membership list will be made available later this month. Please look out for this information via film notes, emails, social media and the website.