**'Quo Vadis, Aida?': Film Review | Venice 2020**

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Venice Film Festival

'Quo Vadis, Aida'

A terrifically harrowing historical film that's impossible to forget. [TWITTER](javascript:void(0);)

**Bosnian filmmaker Jasmila Zbanic, whose debut feature 'Grbavica' won Berlin’s Golden Bear, views the 1995 genocide in Srebrenica through the eyes of a courageous UN interpreter.**

Shot without big stars or a convoluted plot, without heroes but with plenty of cowards, Jasmila Zbanic’s *Quo Vadis, Aida?* plunges the viewer into the raw horror of ethnic cleansing during the war in Bosnia Herzegovina. Seen through the eyes of  a UN interpreter, events unfold on July 11, 1995, in the small town of Srebrenica, which entered into history when units of the Bosnian Serb army commanded by Ratko Mladic murdered more than 7,000 civilians, primarily men and boys, and raped the town’s women.

Zbanic’s expert telling is simple and to the point, relying on the audience’s empathy with the anguished interpreter to reach the heart of darkness in this tragic story. It may be the definitive account of Srebrenica on film, and it opened Venice competition (it is also playing in Toronto) on a somber high note.

The subject is horrifying but the screen is hard to look away from, as the situation becomes a powder keg of tension. Though there have been serious documentaries made over the years, photographic exhibits and other memorials, Zbanic’s fictionalized screenplay sucks the viewer into the nightmare of Srebrenica, where Mladic’s murderous soldiers triumphantly swagger through a deserted town and the residents flee to what they think is the safety of a United Nations compound. The film is a grave indictment of the way UN forces reneged on their promise to bomb the Serbs if they attacked the population. Stymied by bureaucracy and political unwillingness to irritate Serbia, they inertly allow thousands to be loaded onto buses and taken to their deaths.

There is absolutely no feeling of the Euro pudding in this international co-production, which includes Bosnia and Herzegovina, Austria, Romania, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, France, Norway and Turkey. On the contrary, the Sarajevo-born Zbanic takes a very personal approach, echoing the heart and guts of her first feature *Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams*, which won the Golden Bear in Berlin in 2006. But whereas *Grbavica* confronted the post-war legacy of Bosnian women raped by Serbs during the war, the current film goes directly for the pain and fear of the moment itself.

The story is told from the viewpoint of Aida (Jasna Djuricic), a local woman whose husband was once the town’s schoolmaster and whose two grown sons are dangerously exposed to the invading army. Working as an interpreter for the Dutch UN peacekeeping battalion, who in that moment is deployed in the region, she is a  tough-minded professional privy to high-level intelligence.  That morning, as Mladic’s forces roll into town behind huge armored tanks, Aida translates at a tense meeting between ranking UN colonel Thom Karremans (Johann Heldenbergh) and the city mayor, who is visibly upset. The UN promises air strikes on the Serbs if they break a new ultimatum, but no one is convinced they’ll carry through. Aida’s worst fears are confirmed when the colonel calls headquarters for urgent instructions and is told everyone up to the Secretary General is on vacation.

As the Serbs enter the town, its 30,000 residents head for a vast UN hangar surrounded by fencing. The Dutch contingent allows in only 5,000 before shutting the gate; everybody else is forced to camp outside. An overhead crowd shot shows a vast sea of people that seems truly endless. As the situation rapidly degenerates, Aida puts her duties on hold to look for her husband Nihad (Izudin Bajrovic) and sons on the other side of the fence. The only way she can get them inside is to volunteer Nihad for a “citizen’s meeting” with Mladic himself (played with frightening sobriety by Boris Isakovic).

It’s a toss-up whether the citizens involved will ever return from this encounter, where even Karremans finds himself under the thumb of the Serbian commander. When Serbs armed to the teeth confront the young Dutch guards at the UN camp, it’s no contest. They march inside the crowded hangar, intimidating everyone. When Mladic arrives they start loading people onto buses which, the people are told, will take them to a nearby town and safety. The men and women are separated. The rest takes place off-screen.

Aida, however, has overheard enough to know she has to smuggle her sons out of the camp somehow. Serbian actress Jasna Djuricic (*White White World*) is mesmerizing in the main role: Fighting like a lioness for her cubs, she badgers, bullies and implores the people she works for to give them UN documents. The tension and excitement mount as one escape path after another is closed off to them. And we know what fate awaits them if they don’t get out.

Though the film’s title at first seems arbitrary, the Latin *quo vadis?* (Where are you going?) echoes the Biblical scene when the apostle Peter, fleeing from crucifixion in Rome, meets the risen Christ on the road and asks him this question. Jesus replies that he’s going to Rome to be crucified again, and Peter gathers his courage and returns to Rome and to crucifixion. It is a poignant gloss on the film’s heartbreaking closing scene, which, against all odds, suggests a note of optimism for the future.  

*Production companies: Deblokada, Coop99 Filmproduktion, Digital Cube, N279 Entertainment, Razor Film, Extreme Emotions, Indie Prod, Tordenfilm, TRT, ZDF ARte, ORF, BHRT  
Cast: Jasna Djuricic, Izudin Bajrovic, Boris Isakovic, Johan Heldenbergh, Raymond Thiry, Boris Ler, Dino Bajrovic, Emir Hadzihafizbegovic  
Director, screenwriter: Jasmila Zbanic  
Producers: Damir Ibrahimovich, Jasmila Zbanic  
Director of photography: Christine A. Maier  
roduction designer: Hannes Salat  
Costume designers: Malgorzata Karpiuk, Ellen Lens  
Editor: Jaroslaw Kaminski  
Music: Antoni Komasa-Lazarkiewicz  
Casting: Narcisa Cvitanovic  
Venue: Venice Film Festival (Competition)  
World sales: Indie Sales  
103 minutes*