



Spielberg's Document

Tuesday, October 13, 2015

It's always an occasion for me when a new Steven Spielberg film appears, and I had the pleasure last night of attending an early screening of his latest and 28th feature – Bridge of Spies. I'm going to post a review of that after it opens.

But I was moved to delve back through my own history, pre-Cinefex, to a time when I was writing film reviews for another publication, the Steven Spielberg Film Society in Arizona. Back then, Judy Hubbard and her husband Don Archer published their wonderful little fanzine on average four times a year for 80 issues, from January 1981 to November 2000. I described our friendship here in my tribute to Don, who passed away in 2012. And, with Judy's permission, I decided to revisit one of my golden oldie reviews as a Flashfilms blog in tribute to the big man, who 21 years later is still at the top of his game.



What follows was published in SSFS newsletter #53, during the theatrical release of a film that, a month later, won Spielberg his first 'best director' Oscar:

Spielberg's Document: Schindler's List

by Joe Fordham (Feb. 1994)

In quiet defiance of the holiday season, *Schindler's List* is packing in audiences to the few select theaters in the few select cities where Universal MCA has dared release this three hour black and white holocaust tale. After all, how could they have anticipated such unanimously hyperbolic critical response? Who could have foretold such wildfire public word-of-mouth? Spielberg was cautious at the outset, shooting on the tail of *Jurassic Park* and bringing in production for a modest \$22-million. Who could have guessed sweet little Steven would unleash his bloodiest, his lost brutal, his most luminous, unrelentingly sad cry from the heart since *E.T.*?

No one who has followed Spielberg's career should be surprised at the impact that his latest, his fourteenth, feature is having on American audiences right now. It's a long-repressed subject for Spielberg himself and perhaps a reaction, conscious or not, to critics and cynics with little time for extra-terrestrials and lost arks.

You want horror? This is horror. This is death as it was to six million Jews. Don't hide your eyes; it won't go away. It happened. Here it is. You want grit? You want realism? Just be



thankful he chose black and white. How much blood can you take? Put down your buttered popcorn and smell burning flesh.

He's as political as anyone – an emotional filmmaker with a deep empathy for character, a visionary eye and a musical cinematic insight. With Michael Kahn and John Williams as his only tried-and-true U.S. allies, Spielberg evokes a mammoth slow-burning epic from an almost all-Polish crew, most notably led by production designer Allan Starski and cameraman, Janus

Kaminski. It's a considerable achievement, beautifully realized. A nightmare on a grand scale wade compelling by imagery of real suffering inflicted upon real people with real faces.

Spielberg is always at the peak of his form with non-'star' acting material. Ben Kingsley of course we have seen before as *Gandhi* (remember that Oscar year?), but his is a face, like San Neill in *Jurassic Park*, that lends itself the anonymity of his character. Kingsley plays Itzhak Stern, Schindler's accountant and personal advisor, the voice of reason at the center of the stars. Schindler himself, Irishman Liam Neeson plays the raconteur Nazi industrialist, with subtle strength and wit; while British stage actor Ralph Fiennes completes the third corner of the story as Schindler's opponent, the monstrous Oberleutnant Amon Goeth.

Schindler and Goeth are both egomaniacs, each the center of his own world. Schindler's

fascination is commerce; Goeth's is death. Both share the same greed for power. The story focuses on Schindler's conflict with his dreams of financial gain and the reality of the chaos threatening to engulf them all, yet his personal reaction is always rooted in his own brand of common sense – he never planned on being anybody's savior, his own interest is 'good business.' Exterminating his workforce is no way to increase profits. The outcome of Schindler's actions, compiling his famous list and saving the lives of 1,100 men, women and children, together with his final friendship with Stern, is made all the more poignant by this resolute lack of sentimentality.



Spielberg's style reflects this simplicity, from his editorial style and use of captions that simply drop us into place in history in unblinking black and white, to the raw energy of the camerawork – frequently handheld, but never gratuitously so, and not a single crane shot! The same is said for his use of music. John Williams shares center stage with Itzhak Perlman underscoring the action with a haunting Hebraic lullaby for orchestra, violin and clarinet, a solo violin occasionally lending a harrowing refrain. Both visuals and score are beautiful but stark, and almost unbearably sad.

Schindler's List must be Spielberg's darkest work to date, very much worthy of all its critical accolades, none of which ironically amount to a hill of beans in the light of what this movie really represents. Everyone should take note. Spielberg has delivered a timely and elegant slap in the face to movie audiences worldwide. Truffaut would have been proud. It's a deeply felt and personal epic that shines a light onto a subject that needed to be seen, hence Spielberg's consents that this film 'is not so much a motion picture but a document....' Most importantly, it's a plea for hope. Spielberg starts the film with the



lighting of a candle, a simple image that he repeats later in the film, and one that captures Stern's final message to Schindler, 'Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire.'

Schindler was a complicated man with many contradictions. He was a lover of women, unable to maintain a stable relationship with his wife. He was a lover of luxury and fine living, unable or unwilling to see the misery his acquisitions caused

others in their trickle-down effect – but Spielberg never judges him, allowing visuals and action to state their case. As three hours draw to a close, the emotional hammering relents, giving way to a gentle coda and a simple celebration of survival. The net effect is

overwhelming. The horror leaves its mark but the massed ranks of Schindler's Jews filing past with music bring the message home. Schindler say have felt he could have done more, and he may have been just a man with his own share of faults, but Spielberg has immortalized his in our imaginations and gives us food for thought for future generations.

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