

Hollywood: “War Horses” and the “Great War” of 1914-1918.

A Comment on Steven Spielberg's most recent movie

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My dictionary's definition of “warhorse”: (1) A knight's or trooper's powerful horse; (2) A veteran soldier; (3) A reliable hack (a person hired to do dull routine work).

Forget, for a moment, the horse that seems to be the star of this movie: the real “warhorse” is the sad old man, an incompetent and alcoholic farmer living with his wife and teenaged son Albert in a gingerbread cottage somewhere in Devonshire, England, on the eve of the “Great War” of 1914-1918.

The film shows how Albert, too, becomes a “warhorse.” Papa was in the Boer War, doing his patriotic duty for the British Empire, saving the lives of lots of buddies, and generally being a hero; for which, when the job was done, the authorities pinned some medals on his chest. But when he returned to his farm, he tossed the medals aside, leaving it up to mommy to save them, and later show them off to her son. The only memento papa cared to keep was the pennant of his unit, a reminder of his selfless service in a war in which, like any good warhorse, he had asked no questions. Impressed, Albert pockets the pennant.

In 1914, Albert becomes a “warhorse” too, joining the army as a volunteer, even though he is under age. He fights stoically and heroically on the bloody battlefields of France, manages to wipe out a mile of German trenches with one well-thrown grenade, and saves his own buddies too. He also gets gassed rather massively, but that only causes some temporary discomfort and red cheeks - no big deal!

So the film can reach the minimum two hours required to qualify for blockbuster status, viewers are also forced to sit through some pretty tacky scenes involving yet another “warhorse,” this time a real horse named Joey, belonging to Albert. When the war breaks out, Joey is sold to the cavalry and whisked off to France with papa's pennant attached to it. The poor hack somehow survives a cavalry charge, hangs around for a while with two German deserters, is adopted by a pretty French mademoiselle living with gramps in yet another gingerbread cottage, hauls huge cannons up hilltops for the Krauts, and even performs a little pas de deux with a tank - old-style versus new-style cavalry, get it? And - just like the two human warhorses! - Joey also manages to take care of a buddy, a big black horse he'd been teamed up with, first for the benefit of the British and then for the Germans.

Since this is Hollywood, Albert, Joey and the pennant are happily reunited at war's end. They trek home to the farm in Devon and - against a gorgeous sunset lifted from Gone with the

Wind – papa proudly welcomes back the pennant, now also a token of his son’s patriotic service as a warhorse. Isn’t that wonderful?

Here is something less wonderful: the war in question – but never questioned in any way by the filmmaker – is the “Great War” of 1914-1918, a senseless bloodbath if ever there was one, wiping out hundreds of thousands of the humble denizens of the British Empire who duly rallied behind the flag and did as they were told by their superiors. And the moral of the story, dear moviegoer, is this: when your own empire goes to war – anywhere, for whatever reason – you don’t ask questions. You rally behind the flag and do your duty unthinkingly, like the warhorses in the movie. And if you can’t be a warhorse yourself, you should at least respect and admire those who march off to serve as warhorses, applaud their actions, and approve the war they are fighting, no matter how bloody and senseless.

The message implied in Warhorse is a militarist one. If Spielberg is to rack up another Academy Award, let’s hope it isn’t for this film.

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