

Was It Just?

August 16, 2012

A Review of Valor's Dawn

Valor's Dawn attempts to find the balance between a thoughtful historical drama and a sweaty action thriller that ends up with a seamless mixture that will satisfy both genres as well as the audience. Clocking in at just 16 minutes, it is a handsome production that is more lean than ornate, succeeding at narrowing its focus on a singular historical event, while still managing to ponder the larger issues of honor, loss and integrity. In the British Isles of 100 A.D., the Roman general Eydis attempts to vanquish the heroic resistance of a local Celtic Chieftain named Ambiorix, played admirably and powerfully by renowned New York stage actor, Reed Clare, whose efforts to defend his land, though justified, perhaps even laudable, may have come at the cost of not only his son but his soul. The production, also directed by Reed Clare, presents us with a cinematic display of how best to explore, with brevity, a nuanced unraveling, as his film progresses from one of pure action to one that takes just enough time to examine the theme of Ambiorix's salvation. This period spectacle cuts to the chase, and to the swashbuckling, with a heart pounding alacrity reminiscent of a big budget popcorn flick while never losing its (tormented) conscience. This isn't a blood-soaked parade of gratuitous violence but a thoughtful morality play that deftly includes some violent action essential to our understanding of the (mainly inner) conflict at the heart of the story.

And as with all compelling morality plays, this little gem asks more questions than it answers, but two things are certain: Valor's Dawn delivers - and conquers. Indeed, women moviegoers - and a few men, I suppose - who like their sword-wielding beefcake served up in breastplates and short skirts, will have their hearts set aflutter by the heated interplay of two wonderfully fit young actors engaging in a display of dynamic, well-choreographed fight sequences that are intriguing and tensely combative, rousing and animated. Like Erroll Flynn with pectoral implants, the dependably rugged male lead, played by Reed Clare, sustains sword play that would make an Olympic fencer envious, for it is the the magnetic Mr. Clare who, as the young would-be King, tends to dominate the combat scenes with both his undeniable physical presence and that more important, less definable, quality known as screen presence. Despite the slight discrepancy in the stature of the male leads, the pairing of the two is ultimately quite complementary, with most of the highly dexterous combat scenes exploding not with special effects but with pure, unadulterated vitality. However, beneath the surface noise and all the toys for boys, like Orson Wells aging through the decades of Citizen Kane's timeline, Mr. Clare as Ambiorix, with the help of a masterful team of make-up artists, astutely and believably lends dimension to his character as he matures into his senior years: as a bedridden old man, the male lead is able to display the quieter side of his acting chops, relying as much on a skillful pageant of facial expressions and mannerisms as he does on the dialogue of his succinct script. It is commendable to see the talented Reed Clare wearing as many diverse hats as it takes to bring to fruition this challenging epic-ish short film.

As for some of those challenges, seeing as the production was shot, on a tight budget, in and around modern day New York, the scenery appears remarkably authentic to a 1st century period piece, as do the plush interior sets and the detailed costume designs. Similarly, the crisply professional sound editing and the hypnotic score suggest a

finished product with a budget ten times greater. With its exacting adherence to historically accurate sets, costuming and weaponry, *Valor's Dawn* displays a degree of verisimilitude comparable to any expensively produced BBC or PBS costume drama. The only minor quibble one could have with an otherwise consistent display of authenticity in this film comes from the fact that the characters, though riveting, speak with a flat American accent that seems out of place in the British Isles of the 1st century. Such concerns are quickly left behind by a well-paced story that, rising above the impulse to inundate us with Tarantino-type overkill, invites us, instead, to share in an exploration of more cerebral themes: rather than offering tidy proclamations of honor and loyalty, this thought-provoking script challenges us to reconsider the moral justifications we grant ourselves - and our leaders - for the use of force, and how one heated act of betrayal (or was it?) can resonate through an individual and his empire, haunting both until their last breath.

As the film builds to its powerful conclusion, though all of the acting is credible, it is again the work of Mr. Clare, as Ambiorix, that really stands out as the decades-spanning plot demands that he evolve, on screen, from a virile, clearly fit, young warrior to a contemplative, wrinkled old King on his death bed, tormented by the demons of his own history, questioning the moral validity of his power. And it is in the torment of that conscience that this little film works splendidly as a political allegory for our present day quagmires.

So, when Ambiorix asks himself, and us, "is it just?" most moviegoers around the globe, understandably caught up in the drama, will shout back at the silver screen: "yes!" Implying, of course, that resisting the occupation of a foreign invader is almost always a just cause - by whatever means possible, from the scripted to the improvised. But for the cast and crew of *Kingdom Come*, at least, it is mission accomplished indeed.

Byron Thomson,
Westcoast Weekly
-bt/2012