

A Few Good Men

Film: Valkyrie

Director: Brian Singer

Cast: Tom Cruise, Kenneth Branagh, Tom Wilkinson and Bill Nighy

I remember reading this old *Mad* spoof on World War II movies some years back, which lampooned the changing face of the Nazi/Japanese prison commandant over the decades. According to its timeline, the films made during wartime and soon after always depict these commandants as lean, blood-guzzling embodiments of evil, subjecting their malnourished and hapless Allied prisoners to all manner of ignominy in order to satisfy their insatiable malice towards all things decent. Over the course of the feature, as the years pass and Hollywood mellows, these villains become increasingly sympathetic, eventually seen going into paroxysms of despair every time one of their valued prisoners needs to be sacrificed to the whims of their country's wayward leadership (even the prisoners grow more and more understanding of this unwelcome necessity). By the end of the feature you can't tell apart the prisoner from the prison guard, both looking equally contented with their respective stations in life (which are not so different after all), lounging around and tossing back gin rickeys and sharing stogies, fondly discussing that steadily impending day when peace would arrive with a big grin and handshakes all around.

The function of *Mad*, of course, is to exaggerate the truth: which, in this case, refers to Hollywood's enduring and constantly evolving obsession with World War II drama. We've seen massive epics that chronicle the war and its atrocities from a deific perspective, action thrillers that glorify violence and create unlikely heroes, human dramas that examine the intricate interplay of lives caught in the chaos, and even the odd satire that pokes holes in our inflated sense of right and wrong. In all this abundance, however, there has always been a mild bias in these films (understandably so, given the dominant ideological leanings of the establishment, and the fact that war movies are automatically classified under Oscar bait): there is always a reluctance on the part of the average producer to tell stories about the lives of insiders in the Nazi administration.

And, in my own roundabout way, this is where I introduce the movie under review here, the next step in Wartime Hollywood's evolution, a mainstream film that has dared to let slip that there were a few Germans too who exhibited extraordinary courage and heroism during those morbid times: Brian Singer's *Valkyrie*, a LeCarre-style retelling of a foiled military coup in Nazi Germany.

Starring Tom Cruise in an impeccably restrained lead role as Colonel Claus Von Stauffenberg, *Valkyrie* is really not worthy of the negative criticism it's been

recently receiving. If anything, it's Singer's triumphant return to form, drawing reservoir-loads from his knack for essaying a suspenseful plot (as seen in the brilliantly entertaining *The Usual Suspects* – the title of which, ironically, refers to a witty piece of dialogue from *Casablanca*, another great World War II thriller). It hinges on the unsuccessful fifteenth and final plot to assassinate Hitler, audaciously perpetrated on 20th July 1944 by Stauffenberg, a Strangelovesque figure with several integral parts of his body missing, and his high-ranking cronies. The plan is for a group of rebel politicians and high militia to sever the current head of state, and then use the altered provisions in a continuity-of-government operations plan called 'Walküre', or 'Valkyrie', to disarm the SS and assume leadership of the country, thereby allowing the new government to broker a hasty peace with their enemies before Europe is laid to waste. Everything in the plan is worked out and accounted for with characteristic Teutonic accuracy, except for circumstance.

Cruise, in his modulated performance, is supported by a group of the best dramatic talents that Singer could muster from across the Atlantic – Bill Nighy, Tom Wilkinson, Kenneth Branagh, Terence Stamp and, improbably, comedian Eddie Izzard, among others. *Valkyrie's* greatest strength and one minor flaw both come from this talented gang of Brits. The acting's spot on, but between Cruise and the limeys, all the good guys in the movie have distinctly Allied accents, while the baddies, deliberately or not, all sport camp German accents of the ve-haf-vayz-of-making-you-talk species. Distractions notwithstanding, the film's pacing and unimposing direction coerce you to ignore all such eccentricities as the plot races ahead. Singer's ability to keep things taut makes a wincing, squirming fool out of you – you know exactly what's going to happen, as per History's incontrovertible testimony, but you can't help hoping in your heart of hearts that Stauffenberg will somehow be successful at his mission. It's a strangely disconcerting feeling.

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