

MOVIES

'Saving Private Ryan' brutally honest look at war

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

The landing boats rock and bounce on the rough waters off Normandy. Soldiers vomit from fear and seasickness. The boat drops too soon, under the barrage of gunfire, and soldiers jump into water over their heads, brought down by enemy fire or drowned by the weight of their own equipment. Time condenses and expands. The noise is unbearably loud and then numbingly quiet. And everywhere is the acrid smell of gunpowder, the walls of the dying, blood, gore, and fear, heroics and cowardice. This is what war looks like,

sounds like and feels like.

The opening sequence of Steven Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan" recreates the landing on Omaha Beach, June 6, 1944, from the perspective of one platoon with a brutal honesty rarely seen in fictional war movies. Unlike Daryl Zanuck's "Longest Day," "Ryan's" D-Day landing has no stirring martial music, no gallant John Wayne and no bloodless, easy deaths.

Spielberg brings his unequalled technical mastery to bear on this visually graphic and emotionally complex look at "the last good war."

Richard Rodat's script is deceptively simple and somewhat contrived. Shortly following

the invasion, the War Department learns that an Iowa farm family has lost three sons within days of each other. Gen. George Marshall orders that the last surviving son be retrieved from somewhere in northern France and returned to his mother. The eight-man platoon we have watched suffer the horrors of the landing are assigned the task at great risk to their own lives.

Rodat's platoon has that typical World War II ethnic and personality mix — the Italian, the Jew, the hot-headed Brooklyn Irish kid, the bookworm, the beer-like and stalwart sergeant. But he gives these characters individual personalities and never makes them falsely heroic.

Spielberg takes this material and makes it into perhaps the best movie of his long and distinguished career. As a master of manipulation, he finally brings all that magic into focus to actually put us into the danger and agony of war.

One critic said he couldn't figure out what Spielberg was trying to do. Is this a flag-waving, All-American movie or an anti-war movie. He couldn't understand that it is neither and both. This isn't a sermon, it's a meditation. This was not a war of professional soldiers. These men were outworkers and store clerks, teachers and farm boys. They never planned to become soldiers and they weren't prepared for what they experienced, no one could be. Rodat and Spielberg present war as experienced by non-warriors, by ordinary people swept up by history. They meditate on the thin line between courage and cowardice.

Tom Hanks proves again that he is an actor of exquisite subtlety and insight. His performance as platoon leader Capt. John Miller is arguably his best yet. This secretive man with a bad case of the shakes is our surrogate through hell. He is alternately strong and terrified, a man thrust into his position because of his education and steadiness.

A scene in a church that is similar to the pre-battle scene in "Henry V" explores the special burdens of leadership. Hanks projects a humanity that speaks volumes. Spielberg draws fine performances from everyone — Edward Burns as the cocky Brooklyn kid, Tom Sizemore as the loyal Sgt. Horvath; Giovanni Ribisi as the



WARTIME: Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) leads a squad of soldiers behind enemy lines to find and retrieve one man, Private James Ryan, in the wartime action drama "Saving Private Ryan."

compassionate medic; and Jeremy Davies as the weak, childlike Upham. But it is Matt Damon who is especially convincing as Ryan. He underplays the emotions with exactly the right Midwestern stoicism.

And a special word should be said for Harrison Young as the old soldier with so many unspeakable memories.

The real star, though, is Spielberg. The opening sequence and the final battle for a bridge are works of stunning film choreography. Using special film stock, varied time sequencing and Dolby sound as you've never experienced it, Spielberg puts the audience into the war as close as any film has ever come. There is a sequence in the opening where Hanks momentarily loses touch with the world, as if

deep underwater, his face glazed over, eyes locked, face flushed and blood splattered. This sequence tells us everything about the man we are going to follow and much about the brutality of battle.

Cinematographer Janusz Kaminski and editor Michael Kahn combine to make these sequences play out like visual symphonies. And, speaking of music, Spielberg has mastered the use of silence. The John Williams score is typically impressive, haunting at times, but never used in the battle scenes or to pump up the action.

Those looking for a condemnation of war or those looking for a stirring, flag-waving celebration will be disappointed. Yet, Spielberg curiously, and fairly, accomplishes both.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

'THE NEGOTIATOR'

Story of a meek hostage negotiator who becomes the victim of a police frame up. He turns the tables by taking the chief of internal affairs hostage and finds an ally in the negotiator assigned to the situation he's cornered. Stars Samuel L. Jackson and Kevin Spacey.

'THE PARENT TRAP'

A remake of the Disney classic of two sisters separated at birth who finally meet and begin plotting to reunite their long-divorced parents.

'PI'

A science-fiction thriller about the haunting journey into the mind of a renegade mathematician.

'BASKETBALL'

Exclusively at the Landmark Main Art Theatre, a bold, rare exploration into the rights of passage for a young woman, set in the 1980s. Stars Liza Weil, Chad Morgan.

'HOW STELLA GOT HER GROOVE BACK'

Based on the best seller by Terry McMillan, the story of a 40-year-old African American woman who takes a spur of the moment trip to Jamaica and meets the man of her dreams, except he's only half her age. Stars Angela Bassett, Whoopi Goldberg.

'EVER AFTER: A CINDERELLA STORY'

Fresh spin on one of our most beloved tales. Stars Drew Barrymore, Anjelica Huston.

'WHATEVER'

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Plowshares celebrates heritage



ANN DELISI

BACKSTAGE PASS

News Flash: we're all on planet Earth. Sure, it would be cool if men really were from Mars, and from Venus. It'd explain a lot — why men and women can walk into the same office and have entirely different experiences; why conversation among women is so totally different from conversation among men; why conversation between genders can be so completely frustrating.

But nope, we're all born and bred on the same blue marble. We come up with all that interplanetary origins to play with our inability to connect with one another across all the lines we've drawn between us — gender, race, culture and religion among others. And as we've seen so often faced with the problems of "same planet, worlds apart," we turn instinctively turn to the arts for work to do it.

Maybe that's why some of the most compelling theater in Southeast Michigan comes out of Plowshares Theatre in Detroit, which is committed to presenting African American life, trends and traditions on stage — Plowshares celebrates the uniqueness of a community while exploring its underlying, universal humanity at the same time.

Plowshares' producing artistic director also happens to be a *Backstage Pass* correspondent — our pal Gary Anderson, who has hosted performances from theater all over the Metro Area. We've also frequently passed him to appear on the show as a guest, bringing his performers to

the studio to appear on the big show, always with fabulous results.

Like many people in the artistic community, Gary's busy preparing for the upcoming season. I gave him a call to see what's coming up at Plowshares. As always, Gary sounded excited about his work. "Our season opens Nov. 5 with 'Bourbon at the Border' by former Detroit Pearl Cleage. Pearl's father was the Rev. Albert Cleage who started the Shrine of the Black Madonna, an Afrocentric Christian denomination church in Detroit."

"Bourbon" takes place in Detroit in 1955. It's a love story between two former civil rights activists who participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, when activists were going down to register voters. They're college students who get caught up in the events, and what happens to them down there impacts them and their relationship with one another all the way into 1995.

"In October, we're presenting our first-ever children's play, 'Sala Cinderella,' an African-centered retelling of the Cinderella tale. We're doing it because there's really no alternative for children to see children's theatre from an African American perspective."

"For February, which is Black History Month, we're presenting 'In Living Colors,' a dance theatre piece. The play deals with the history and traditions of the Gullah people in the sea islands off the coast of South Carolina. The Gullah are the African Americans that have the most pure African heritage. Off these sea islands, they who weren't as influenced by the mainland culture; although they were enslaved, they were rela-

tively left to themselves. The drum wasn't taken away from them like they were everywhere else. The play talks about the history of that heritage, and power of it."

"In March, we're putting up 'The Trial of One Short-Sighted Black Woman V. Mommy Louise and Safiretta Tala,' a satire about a black female Hollywood executive who puts on trial the stereotypes of the Mammy and the Saffire for the havoc they've wreaked on her life."

"Our season wraps up with August Wilson's 'Jitney.' It takes place in 1977 at the Gypsy Cab Company in Pittsburgh. It's really a play about legacy and about commitment. The cab company is being threatened with extinction — they're going to put a highway through the neighborhood. Sounds familiar: urban renewal. In another issue, the company owner deals with unresolved issues with his son, who's been in jail for 20 years for murder. It's a pretty intense play."

I asked Gary if there's an overall theme to the season. "The theme is really struggle, triumph and celebration. Sure there are obstacles. It's about taking time to celebrate the rich heritage and the triumph over those obstacles." Sounds like theater: everyone on our blue planet should see.

On the big show this week, Gary Graft hosts a performance by the Pat DiNizio Trio. Nkengu Zola visits the studio of interactive artist Robert Martin. We'll see a feminist updating of the Greek classic 'Antigone.' Plus a performance from former Rolling Stone songwriter of the year Freddy Johnson. That's all on *Backstage Pass* tonight at midnight, repeated Friday at 7:30 p.m. on Detroit Public Television.

GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

<p>National Amusements Showcase Cinemas</p> <p>Shoreline Ashtabula Hills 1-14 2150 N. Ogden Rd. Between University & Walton Blvd 810-375-2660 Bargain Matinee Daily All Shows Until 6 pm Continuous Show Daily Late Shows Wed. Thurs. Fri. & Sat.</p> <p>SAVING PRIVATE RYAN (R) JANE AUSTEN'S MARIA (PG-13) MASK OF ZORRO (PG-13) SOMETHING ABOUT MARY (R) LETAL WEAPON 4 (R) SMALL SOLDIERS (PG-13) MADELINE (PG) ARMAGEDDON (PG-13) DR. DOOLITTLE (PG-13) MULAN (G)</p> <p>CALL FOR COMPLETE LISTINGS AND TIMES</p>	<p>Showcase Westland 1-8 6300 Wayne Rd. One Mile S. of Warren Rd. 313-726-1960 Bargain Matinee Daily All Shows Until 6 pm Continuous Show Daily Late Shows Wed. Thurs. Fri. & Sat.</p> <p>SAVING PRIVATE RYAN (R) JANE AUSTEN'S MARIA (PG-13) MASK OF ZORRO (PG-13) SOMETHING ABOUT MARY (R) LETAL WEAPON 4 (R) SMALL SOLDIERS (PG-13) MADELINE (PG) ARMAGEDDON (PG-13) DR. 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