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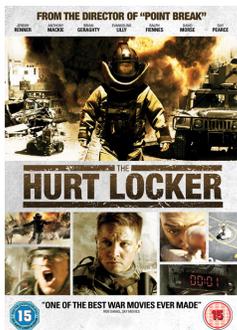
# Palms and Oscars

*The White Ribbon, The Class and The Hurt Locker*

**T**HE CONTRAST between Hollywood and European cinema is nowhere more starkly revealed than in this year's Oscar success *The Hurt Locker* and last year's Palme d'Or winner *The White Ribbon*, both now available on DVD. The former has been described as 'apolitical', 'neutral' and 'anti-war', but it is in reality a hollow apologia for American imperialism that reduces cinema to a clichéd collection of cheap thrills and set pieces.

*The Hurt Locker*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow, is about three members of a US army bomb disposal unit operating to disarm improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Iraq in 2004, a year after the invasion. The three are presented as brave heroes doing their duty to save the world and the human race. One in particular, Staff Sgt William James (Jeremy Renner) is reckless and puts himself and his colleagues in constant danger, but it is emphasised that he is not psychotic because he loves his family and is kind to children, including Iraqis. The Iraqis themselves are stripped of all humanity and shown as feckless, shifty, menacing men (they even put bombs in dead bodies) or screaming and hysterical women. This is even worse than Fox News.

The setting is a real and ongoing conflict, yet we are meant to regard it as 'neutral', even though the perspective is entirely one-sided and there is no attempt to question the presence of US forces as an army of occupation. It is also difficult to regard it as anti-war when its hero finds war so seductive that he prefers it to civilian life and when violence is glamourised as a kind of heightened emotional response. The result is a film which is all cheap suspense, bad politics, and no plot.



In its vicarious thrills *The Hurt Locker* is no different from other recent Oscar winners, including *Gladiator* (2001) and *No Country for Old Men* (2008). This glorification of violence in cinema is both a reflection and a source of violence in the wider society. The US is seriously in need of some self-questioning, especially about its habit of demonising, invading and destroying other countries. Hollywood is, sadly, a willing tool of this brutal militarism.

**T**HE PALME D'OR is the highest prize awarded to films competing at the Cannes Festival in May. Winners in recent years include *The Pianist* (2002), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006), *The Class* (2008) and *The White Ribbon* (2009). Without exception, these five films seek to engage the viewer, to heighten awareness, deepen emotions, question assumptions and expand horizons. We may disagree about whether or not they succeed, but we cannot argue that it is a different world from the candy floss, semi-fascist excuse for culture churned out by Hollywood.

*The Class*, which was the first French film to win the Palme d'Or in 21 years, is an absorbing drama documentary set in a multi-ethnic comprehensive school in a working-class Paris suburb. François Bégaudeau, a former teacher, plays a version of himself in a screenplay largely of his own devising that is based on the novel *Entre les Murs* ('Between the Walls'), which he himself wrote. He is superbly assisted by a group of non-professional 14-15-year-olds who partly improvised the classroom scenes.

*The Class* doesn't follow the usual Hollywood school trajectory where the teacher goes from zero to hero, though it tricks the viewer into thinking it is. François, who tries to be both friendly and firm, has a few victories, notably over the Mali teenager Souleymayne's photographic self-portrait, but they are short-lived: the unruly but generally articulate and politicised kids fall out with him over his careless use of a single word, which is ironic because he has been spending the whole year attempting to teach the importance of linguistic precision.



Thanks to the subtle direction of Laurent Cantet, *The Class* has the appearance of an artless, fly-on-the-wall reality TV show rather than a work of fiction. It also achieves a greater degree of objectivity than *The Hurt Locker* by not taking sides and having no apparent message, apart from highlighting the problems of teaching in a multi-ethnic society where democracy extends to having pupil representatives sit in on pupil progress staff meetings.

Triumphantly exploiting the Aristotelian unities, *The Class* generates a boiling cauldron that proves infinitely more tense and gripping than *The Hurt Locker's* bomb-littered Baghdad streets.

**T**he *White Ribbon*, which won last year's Palme d'Or, is directed by the Austrian filmmaker and writer Michael Haneke, who also directed the 2005 hit *Caché* and the two versions of *Funny Games*. His latest is set in a North German village on the cusp of World War One. Its main character, now in old age, narrates the story of a series of sinister incidents in the village where he was a teacher (played by Christian Friedel). He says that they may help to 'clarify some things that happened in this country', which presumably refers to sowing the seeds of fascism – a large claim indeed.

The nasty occurrences in themselves hardly offer an explanation. They include: the local doctor breaks his collar bone when his horse is felled by a trip wire; a woman worker is killed when the floor of a sawmill collapses; the baron's son is abducted, bound and whipped; a mentally retarded boy is nearly blinded; an entire cabbage patch is destroyed by a man with a scythe; and the pastor's pet budgie is stabbed with scissors.



However, these crimes and misdemeanours, which are largely intended to draw the viewer in, to encourage the asking of questions, are never really solved. This is not so much a whodunit as a whytheydunit, and the answer does relate to punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation (Exodus 20:5). The white ribbon represents innocence, and the pastor's son and daughter are made to wear one to remind them of the purity they have lost.

The pastor (chillingly played by Burghart Klaussner) is the closest the film has to a villain, with his absolutist morality and ruthlessness towards his children. When we see, for example, that the elder son Martin (left) has his hands tied to the sides of the bed at night to prevent him from masturbating, we realise that the children are essentially the victims of their parents, and we have to look to them for the source of the evil. What we see is a highly structured, patriarchal society obsessed with power and authority. The village is a microcosm of Germany at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its repressive religious and moral code, its feudal social structure, its authoritarian politics and its economic inequality. Here are the seeds of the totalitarian mindset that consumed the country after 1933 and the terrorism of modern times.

The painterly black and white photography, absence of a score to ratchet up the emotions and stark, barren images make *The White Ribbon* seem like *The Village of the Damned* remade by Carl Dreyer or Ingmar Bergman. But it is part and parcel of Haneke's attempt to counter the mind-numbing barrel-down Hollywood cinema and instead create a Brechtian alienation effect that enables the viewer to become a consciously critical observer.

So we should not judge *The White Ribbon* in conventional terms. It is not like *Heimat*, the series which began in the 1980s and which dodged the central issue of Nazism in favour of the ordinary lives of Teutonic country folk. Haneke clearly does address the question. He may not say anything new about the origins of Nazism, but at the very least he asks the right questions. □



## Theatre

## Over the Bridge

by Sam Thompson

Roger Clifford



**MY WIFE'S** grandfather was a Master Carpenter at the Harland and Wolff shipyard and worked on the *Titanic*. One day, during a period of sectarian tension, he was advised by some of his friends not to return to work, 'for his own good'. When I use the word 'friend' I am not being sarcastic. These were his friends doing what they thought was right to protect him. My wife's grandfather heeded the warning and never returned to the shipyard.

So it was with a certain amount of personal experience that I went to see *Over the Bridge* by Sam Thompson (1916-65) at the Waterfront Studio theatre. This new version, staged by Green Shoot Productions and adapted by its founder Martin Lynch, marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the play's first performance on 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1960.

Director Rachel O'Riordan put together a top cast, including: Frankie McCafferty (*Omagh, Name of the Father, City of Ember*), Lalor Roddy (*Hunger, Five minutes of Heaven*), Tony Flynn (*The Tudors, Some Mother's Son, Glenroe*), Richard Clements (*The English Class, I Fought the Law*), Alan McKee (*Closing the*

*Ring, Divorcing Jack*), Karen Hassan (*Hollyoaks, Later, Last Man Hanging*), Michael Liebmann (*You, Me and Marley, Omagh*) and Matthew McElhinney, (*Closing the Ring, Five Minutes of Heaven*).

All put in confident, moving and believable performances. However, Walter McMonagle (*The Sweeney, The Onedin Line, Auf Wiedersehen Pet*) as Davy Mitchell, the veteran trade union leader, and Billy Carter (*Primeval, Holby City*), who plays Peter O'Boyle, the victimised Catholic worker, steal the show.

The atmosphere is set from the off as, entering the studio theatre, the audience mingles with dockers going about their daily business to a backdrop of shipyard sounds. Sam Thompson guides you into the heart of the Harland and Wolff shipyard in the late 1950s, with the IRA border campaign fanning the flames of sectarian tension.

The play revolves around the workings of a trade union committee and focuses on how they interact with each other, the management, their members, and the undercurrent of sectarianism everywhere.

As the play is set in the 'closed shop' era, the power of the union is there for all to see. However, when logic and reason are replaced by religious intolerance their own dogma is challenged. Mistrust between two formally union allies begins to sour the working atmosphere, escalating with tragic consequences.

The climax centres on how the 'good' men in the shipyard react to the evil and how the trade union values of solidarity stand up in the face of mindless hatred. Many, like my wife's grandfather, faced this dilemma; and the almost unbearably taut finale takes us with Peter O'Boyle as he faces up to the mob.

Sectarianism and bigotry, like broken bottles, are pushed into your face. They are the 'elephant in the room', finally grabbing you by the throat and asking: "How would YOU deal with this?"

I left the theatre with that very question in my mind. □

*Over the Bridge* ran from Wednesday 17th March through Saturday 3rd April 2010.