

# A visceral, realistic film about the Holocaust

**Sheldon Kirshner**  
Staff Reporter

Agnieszka Holland's *In Darkness* is a raw, visceral, unsettling descent into the dark maw of the Holocaust.

Adapted for the screen by David Shamoon from Robert Marshall's book *In the Sewers of Lvov*, this jolting drama cum-thriller will be presented at the Toronto International Film Festival on Sept. 11, at 6 p.m. at the Elgin and Sept. 12, at 3:30 p.m. at the Scotiabank 3.

Based on a true story, *In Darkness* takes place over a 14-month period in Nazi-occupied Lvov, a multiethnic city in Poland inhabited by Poles, Ukrainians and Jews.

Holland dedicates it to Marek Edelman, one of the commanders of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising who survived the ordeal, and the 6,000 or so Polish Christians whom Yad Vashem has designated as Righteous Among by Nations.

From almost the first moment, she creates a mood of sheer, unbridled terror.

Naked Jewish women, terrorized by pursuers with guns, race for their lives through an autumn forest. German soldiers humiliate an Orthodox Jew by forcing him to do a little dance. A soldier brutally cuts off the black beard of a frightened Jewish man.

As the Nazis impose their reign of terror, Leopold (Poldek) Socha, a Polish sewer worker, stumbles upon a small group of Jews who've descended into the subterranean depths to save themselves in advance of the liquidation of the Lvov ghetto.

Socha (Robert Wieckiewicz, in a strong, nuanced performance) is a petty thief who cynically regards their presence in the dank, labyrinthine sewer system as a golden opportunity to enrich himself.

In exchange for ample payments, Socha agrees to find them a safe hiding place and supply them with food and water. He knows he and his family will face execution if the Germans and their Ukrainian collaborators uncover his scheme, but he's ready to take that risk.

Since antisemitism runs rife in Lvov, no one will be surprised that Socha is a bigot. "Give a Jew a finger and he'll take your arm," he blurts out at one point. Bortnik, a Ukrainian policeman and a Nazi collaborator, is even



**Robert Wieckiewicz plays a sewer worker in Nazi-occupied Lvov in the Polish film *In Darkness*.**

more antisemitic, claiming that Germany's occupation is good for Ukrainians and Poles alike.

As the film unfolds, in a mix of Polish, German, Yiddish and Ukrainian with English subtitles, the Germans proceed with emptying the ghetto. Holland inserts powerful scenes of Jewish men, women and children being rounded up in a blur of sickening movement. The soundtrack is full of screaming, shouting and shooting as fear and panic grip the hapless Jewish deportees.

With the Jews having been taken away, heartless scavengers search for "ghetto souvenirs," household goods left behind by Jews on the sidewalks.

*In Darkness*, however, is not permeated exclusively by vile antisemites. In an attempt to achieve a measure

of balance, Holland introduces a sympathetic character whose personality seems defined by empathy and humanity. Wanda, Socha's wife, describes the Jewish deportees as "these poor people" and observes they are "the same as us."

Socha resists her *cri de coeur*. Saying his priest told him that Jews crucified Jesus, he leaves the distinct impression that they deserve their terrible fate. In a signal of his possible intentions, he points out that people are making "easy money" turning in Jews to the Germans.

Much of *In Darkness* – Poland's entry for best foreign film at the 2012 Academy Awards – is shot in the dim, claustrophobic confines of the sloshy, smelly, rat-infested sewers.

Here, life goes on, in a manner of speaking. Personal disputes break out, class differences rise to the surface, romances emerge and sexual passions are unleashed.

And while Holland takes pains to reenact these human impulses, she is particularly interested in charting the course of Socha's gradual transformation from opportunist to hero, the theme at the very heart of the film.

Playing fast and loose with his life, he kills a German soldier to help a Jew, goes out of his way to find Jewish children lost in the sewer and redirects "his" Jews to a safer hideout in the sewer.

More amazingly, he performs a series of good deeds that may startle a viewer. Holland does not bother explaining Socha's metamorphosis, but it is clearly touching.

As movies about the Holocaust go, *In Darkness* is one of the better ones. Vividly realistic and reasonably well directed, it is ultimately soul crushing.

## Footnote is a first-rate Israeli film

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Staff Reporter

Joseph Cedar's drama, *Footnote*, sizzles with laser-sharp intensity.

This Israeli film about father-son rivalry, academia jealousy and the importance of family solidarity will be screened twice at the forthcoming Toronto International Film Festival.

The dates are Monday, Sept. 12, at 5:15 p.m. at the Bell Lightbox 2 and Wednesday, Sept. 14, at 2 p.m. at the AMC 10.

*Footnote*, which is set in Jerusalem, comes to Toronto with honours in hand, having won the Cannes Film Festival's best screenplay award.

The prize is richly deserved. One of the finest Israeli movies in recent years, it is propelled by an exceptionally fine script. Cedar, a master screenwriter, has directed sharply focused films such as *Beaufort* (an Oscar nominee), *Time of Favour* and *Campfire*.

Taking place mostly on the campus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, *Footnote* turns on Eliezer Shkolnik (Shlomo Bar Aba), a distinguished scholar of Talmud, and his son, Uriel (Lior Ashkenazi), who has followed in his footsteps.

Eliezer, played stoically by Bar Aba, a popular comedian in real life, is a loner, a man apart of few words whose claim to scholarly fame is a mere footnote in someone else's book.

Like a hermit, he spends his days in a dim library, poring over venerable Hebrew texts. As his son says in a revealing speech laced with self-deprecating humour, Eliezer is a quintessential teacher, utterly devoted to his research.

Although he is generally recognized as a first-rate scholar, the all-important Israel Prize has eluded him for the past 20 consecutive years.

For all his achievements in academia, Eliezer has prob-

lems relating to people. Indeed, his relationship with Uriel seems oddly competitive. At one point, after an exasperated Uriel describes his father as "weird," he says, "I have no idea who this man is."

Eliezer's long-suffering wife, Yehudit (Alisa Rosen), would probably agree. Their relations are cool and distant and they no longer share a bedroom.

Uriel, strongly portrayed by Ashkenazi, is the polar opposite of Eliezer in terms of personality. He is personable, talkative and accessible. A rising star in his field, he takes a much broader approach to Talmud than Eliezer, who appears caught up in minutiae.

Cedar, in bold brushstrokes, composes a plausible and compelling portrait of two radically different men related by blood but not by temperament.

The film, in a clever plot twist, grows taut and suspenseful when Uriel learns that he, rather than his father, is to be awarded the next Israel Prize.

The good news is tempered by incredibly bad news. At a tense meeting convened by the Israel Prize committee, Uriel is forced into a morally unpalatable quandary. At stake here is not only his career, but his father's well-being.

Simply put, no man should be placed in this kind of an agonizing and untenable position.

Cedar handles the dynamics of this potentially explosive situation with ease and aplomb.

Apart from the two lead players, the rest of the cast is superb. Micah Lewensohn is excellent as a spiteful professor who harbours a grudge against Eliezer, while Ala Zack is fine as Uriel's sensitive wife, Dikla. Yuval Scharf is appealing as a young reporter interviewing Eliezer for a profile.

*Footnote* is everything a movie of superior quality should be. It is immensely interesting and seamless. It is empathetic. The dialogue sparkles. The actors perform with energy, grace and precision.

Israeli cinema can be proud of this film.

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(total value \$250)

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**Tuesday, October 25th, 8 pm**

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All entries received by 3 p.m. on **Tuesday, October 11th** are eligible. The winning entries will be randomly selected at The CJN offices on **Tuesday, October 11th**. The winners will be notified the same day. Odds of winning depend on the number of entries received. One entry per person.

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Email your information to "contest@thecjn.ca" Re: **I Believe**, or mail to: The Canadian Jewish News, 1500 Don Mills Road, Suite 205, North York, Ont. M3B 3K4 or fax to: 416-391-0949.

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