The Counterfeiters

Talent: Karl Markovics, August Diehl, Devid Striesow, August Zimer, Andreas Schmidt.

Date of review: Thursday 8th May, 2008

Director: Stefan Rudzowitcky
Duration: 98 minutes
Classification: MA
We rate it: 3 and a half stars.

Films set during World War II often come laden with extraordinarily heavy emotional baggage, and while The Counterfeiters isn’t exactly an exception to this rule, it at least provides as uplifting and humanist a message as is possible, given its setting and subject matter. In the hands of a man who, on the surface of things, seems the most unlikely director, The Counterfeiters tells the true story of a group of German Jews who, while imprisoned in a concentration camp during the second world war, were given certain privileges and leniencies in return for engaging in a large-scale forgery effort on behalf of the German Army.

Director Stefan Rudzowitcky has, until now, been chiefly involved with bringing fairly standard slasher/horror films to the screen; some years ago the director rose to prominence (or at least notoriety) with the chilling but by-the-numbers horror flick Anatomie, which starred the German girl-of-the-moment, Franka Potente (Run, Lola, Run). With The Counterfeiters, Rudzowitcky has changed pace entirely, and has made an observant, moving and ultimately uplifting film about one of humankind’s darkest hours.

Lead actor Karl Markovics (whom many people know from the popular TV series Inspector Rex) plays Salomon Sorowitsch, a notorious counterfeiter and nightclub owner who got busy making a fortune working in pre-war Berlin. The film introduces us to this fascinating character after the war, sitting in a casino in, of all places, Monte Carlo. As Sorowitsch’s mind wanders back to his time in the concentration camp, the film moves into a flashback wherein this fascinating story is told.

It seems that a certain faction of the German Army was engaged, during World War II, in a top-secret effort aimed at undermining the economies of both Britain and the US by flooding them with counterfeit bills. The prisoners at a particular concentration camp were gathered together and set upon this project, and it helped keep them alive, but (as the prisoners themselves quickly realised) it also helped bolster the German
Army’s efforts to defeat the Allies. The story of this fascinating film follows these skilled prisoners as they weave their way through the emotional minefield that is this odd predicament, realising inevitably that if they are to bring their work to fruition, they will help to guarantee the victory of the Reich. Tensions between the prisoners rise inexorably, and as the German army begins to decline into anarchy and self-destruction, the prisoners try to delay their own fates by holding off the success of the counterfeiting of the American dollar.

The Counterfeiters manages to turn this strange story into a compelling and suspenseful tale of survival, and despite the director’s previous turns and blood and gore, this film is thankfully free of gratuitous blood – there are horrifying moments, as one would expect, but for the most part the action centres upon the emotional tensions generated between the prisoners engaged in this complex affair. Given the bookending device, too, that ensures that we know that the main character Solomon will survive, we are guaranteed at least a partially uplifting conclusion. As far as World War II films go, this is quite a feat. The Counterfeiters is compelling, suspenseful and moving, and finely performed by all involved.

Nick Prescott