Valkyrie

Valkyrie has been widely billed as the first of Tom Cruise’s steps back into the A-list stratosphere. After all the couch-jumping, manager-firing, studio-hopping, Scientology-spouting weirdness, Tom has apparently decided to get his career back on track (despite the fact that it is arguably in quite good shape, with the star sporting a recent Golden Globe nomination for his quite hilarious turn in Ben Stiller’s Tropic Thunder). Valkyrie is indeed a very serious and sombre film, and despite the fact that it’s backed by a healthy budget, it is a film that is all about performances, so with all of that in mind, it does seem like a decent choice for an actor bent on returning to centre stage.

Valkyrie is one of many recent films that tell a story about World War II as a good old espionage thriller, replete with the odd reflection upon some of our contemporary world’s conflicts. The film’s plot revolves around one of the numerous attempts that Germans army officers made to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Anyone who knows his or her history knows that there were quite a few attempts to kill the Nazi leader, but it’s of course also a widely known fact that Hitler survived all of those attempts, and the he suicided when the Allied victory became apparent. This very fact circumvents much of the suspense that director Bryan Singer attempts to generate during the film, and leaves us wondering where the film will go. Much like the situation that puzzled many of us on walking in to see Titanic, when we walk in to see Valkyrie, many of us are thinking “Well, I already know how it’s going to end, so what’s in it for me?”

What Singer and his talented cast try to do is take us through the looking-glass of history and tell this really quite engaging story literally through the eyes of the high-ranking German officers who were engaged in this particular assassination attempt. This technique has been tried and tested; World War II stories told from a German point of view are often fascinating and effective. From Peckinpah’s Cross of Iron to the recent Black Book, many such films make for fascinating and moving experiences in the cinema. Yet it’s perhaps because so much of Valkyrie’s plot is already known
to us that the film pales in comparison to the aforementioned films; Cross of Iron broke controversial new ground all those years ago, and Black Book told a fictionalised story filled with gut-wrenching suspense. Valkyrie is a film that attempts to render familiar territory as a suspense thriller, and as a result it fizzles out like a bomb that doesn’t detonate.

Bryan Singer, more at home with noirish thrillers like The Usual Suspects or big-budget action fare like the X-Men films, proves here that he can control a film very well and work with a cast crammed full of talented actors; what he can’t seem to do is inject something truly extraordinary into this rather dour film. When all is said and done, why spend seventy million dollars filming a story that might well have worked more effectively as a documentary?

The acting cred on screen here is enormous; Terence Stamp is particularly memorable as a slow-pacing Ludwig Beck, a member of the conspiracy, and the always-reliable Tom Wilkinson does some compelling shouting as General Fromm, a frightening on-screen creation. What’s more, the wonderful Dutch actress Clarice van Houten (who played the lead in Black Book) is here too, but she’s wasted in a tiny role as Cruise’s character’s wife.

Valkyrie ends up being a film that tries and tries but is never as memorable or as powerful as it wants to be. It fails not because of the lack of talented people involved, but because the familiarity of its historical detail renders it null and void as a suspense piece. The recent The Counterfeiters is an example of the great work that Valkyrie fails to be.

Nick Prescott