

Focus on Film

A Bag of Marbles

Drama
Holocaust

Wednesday, May 15, 2019 @ 1:00 p.m.

Director: Christian Duguay, 2017 France, Canada, Czech Republic

Running time: 110 minutes French, German, Yiddish, Russian with English subtitles

There was a time in which films set during the Holocaust were made with the expressed intention of keeping history alive for future generations. What cinema once strived to remind us has now become impossible to forget, given that today Nazism has received newfound empowerment. Holocaust films were always educating us about our past as well as our present, and that truth has perhaps never been more apparent than in the months following last August's white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The great value of Christian Duguay's *A Bag of Marbles* is the degree to which it makes such a barbaric and bewildering chapter in human history comprehensible for young audiences. Yes, the film recounts a real-life tale of survival, but the fate of its lead protagonists in no way diminishes the grueling hardships they face on every step of their journey. Based on the 1973 memoir of the same name by Joseph Joffo, this film aims to construct, in Joffo's own words, a more "honest" portrayal of the author's experiences as a Jewish youth in occupied France.

The vast majority of scenes are viewed from the perspective of 10-year-old Joseph, who must flee from his home in Paris in order to reach a "free zone" in Nice, while accompanied by his 12-year-old brother, Maurice. Humor and wonder will often sneak into our lives when we least expect

them to materialize, and as Joseph and Maurice embark on their arduous journey, they embrace any opportunity to distract themselves from the harsh reality of their plight, whether it be frolicking in a sun-drenched field or toying with one another in brotherly fashion.

Like its characters, "A Bag of Marbles" is perpetually on the move, running from one location to the next as the brothers must rely on the kindness of strangers while simultaneously keeping their guard up. It's to the film's credit that many of these side characters come off as vividly realized people in their own right, including the SS chief who develops an obsession with the boys and the two good Christian men who protect the children as if they were their own kin. The boys' first reunion with their parents is so abrupt and so awash in white light it feels like a dream sequence, and in a sense, it is—conveying a sense of lasting tranquility that the characters will never be able to obtain together. The audience is often lulled into a sense of contentment before malevolence rears its head unexpectedly. Duguay's film succeeds as very good historical drama, but in its final act it turns into a great one.

*Reviewed by Noemi and Jose Mirkin
(excerpts from RogerEbert.com, Matt Fagerholm)*

THE LENORE MARWIL
DETROIT JEWISH
FILM FESTIVAL