



joyeux Noel

Autumn
Season
2009

Review by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat:

In the opening scenes of this French film written and directed by Christian Carion, school boys in France, England, and Germany recite phrases they have been taught about the glories of their country and the scourge of their enemies. In this brief scene we see how people are brainwashed to see war as just and to believe that God is on their side. Add to this the perception that by going to war young men are protecting their families and their land, and it's easy to understand the enthusiasm that can sweep through a community at the outbreak of conflict.

In 1914 Scottish brothers William (Robin Laing) and Jonathan (Steven Robertson) excitedly enlist to fight in World War I; they are looking forward to what they regard as an adventure. Palmer (Gary Lewis), their Anglican minister, goes to the front with them as a stretcher-bearer. In Berlin, Germany, a military official interrupts a performance at the opera house to announce that the country is at war. Tenor Nikolaus Sprink (Benno Furmann; songs performed by Rolando Villazon) is drafted; his lover, Anna Sorensen (Diane Kruger; songs performed by Rolando Villazon), a famous soprano, knows that their lives will never be the same again. Meanwhile, French Lieutenant Audebert (Guillaume Canet) prepares to leave for the front lines without knowing whether his wife, left in German territory, has given birth to their child.

None of these men is prepared for the senseless barbarity of what is to come. Audebert's French troops and a Scottish regiment led by Gordon (Alex Ferns) live in muddy trenches just a few yards from the German lines commanded by Horstmayer (Daniel Bruhl). Many of them die in a senseless charge toward the Germans, who use machine guns to mow them down. A Scottish soldier tries to carry his wounded brother to safety but has to leave him to die in the no-man's land between the trenches.

As Christmas nears, the German command sends Christmas trees with lights and tinsel to their troops. The Scottish and French troops receive packages with liquor and trinkets. Anna Sorensen, the opera singer, uses her beauty and charm to get Sprink brought from the front to join her for a concert at German headquarters. Afterwards, he convinces her to return with him to the trenches to sing to his comrades.

Meanwhile, on the French and Scottish side, Palmer tries to lift the men's spirits with a rendition of "Dreaming of Home" played on the bagpipes. In the German trenches, with Anna standing by him, Sprink sings "Silent Night." He follows this classic with "O Come All Ye Faithful," and Palmer joins him with bagpipe accompaniment. The tenor then grabs a Christmas tree and while singing walks toward the enemy. No shots are fired, and soon the men from Scotland, France, and Germany have laid down their arms and are feeling the Christmas spirit of sharing and joy. While the commanders drink champagne together, others show pictures of their wives and children and share treats from home, including chocolate. Palmer gathers them for a mass, and Anna sings "Ave Maria." It is a moment of true communion and beauty.



On Christmas Day, the commanders call an "official" truce to allow everyone to bury the dead. More camaraderie takes place with a soccer game and then the most incredible sign of mutual respect — the Germans warn the Scottish and French soldiers that they are about to be shelled and invite them to take refuge on the German side. The Scottish and French return the favor when their side retaliates with more barrages from afar. Sadly, the men realize that they must return to the business of war, but they have all been changed by the experience.

This story is inspired by the Christmas truce of 1914, a miraculous occurrence of peace for two days when men laid down their arms, came out of their trenches, and celebrated the holiday together. The aftermath depicted in the film is also part of history. The German, French, and Scottish commanders were severely reprimanded for "fraternization with the enemy." New troops were brought in to replace those who had been tainted by the experience. After all, war depends upon seeing the other side as subhuman.

In a disturbing scene, Palmer, the Anglican priest, is harshly criticized by his bishop, who argues that Jesus did not come to bring peace but a sword. Later, we see the bishop telling the new recruits that they are in a crusade, a holy war for freedom. Hearing these words and realizing how far this view is from the teachings of Jesus, Palmer takes off his cross, leaves it on a bedpost, and walks away.

Elsewhere, the French lieutenant is being shamed by his father, who is also his military superior. He replies, "We have more in common with the German soldiers than with the French politicians that are sending us off to war." How true; it is the soldiers on the ground who most want peace. This movie reverberates in our hearts as we realize that these messages are relevant to present-day situations.

Review by James Berardinelli:

December 1914. World War I is not even five months old, and already the high spirits with which it started are eroding. Generals and leaders still voice the opinion that it's going to be a short war, but the men in the trenches doubt this. Yet, following days of bloodshed and in advance of a brutal struggle of attrition that will lead to millions of deaths, there is a brief respite when all truly is quiet on the Western Front. For Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in 1914, enemies ceased their hostilities and acted toward each other as comrades trapped in the midst of the ultimate, tragic absurdity. This story, based on true events, is what *Joyeux Noel* relates.

When it comes to war films, World War I is underrepresented. There are some very good movies out there - *The Grand Illusion*, *Paths of Glory*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *A Very Long Engagement* leap to mind - but the list is short when compared to the library of titles devoted to World War II. The reason may have something to do with the motivations of the struggle. While many considered the Second World War to be a moral crusade, the causes of the 1914-1918 conflict were less noble, fuelled as they were by nationalism, stubbornness, and a tangled web of alliances. The Kaiser wasn't the only culprit.

World War I was fought using tactics of the 19th century and weapons of the 20th. France's major assault was halted when its troops were mowed down by machine guns. Germany's main offensive bogged down in Belgium when the army became overextended and the British joined the fray. Trenches were built and troops dug in. What was initially expected to be a short and jaunty war turned into a long, horrific struggle in which the price of advancing one hundred feet was measured in hundreds of thousands of lives.

On Christmas Eve of 1914, carolling in the French, German, and Scottish trenches led to a sense of mutual understanding and a temporary truce that lasted through the next day. The dirty, dishevelled men emerged into No Man's Land to exchange small gifts - cigarettes for chocolates or champagne - and share pictures of their wives and children. They buried their dead and played soccer. On any day in any city, the activities would have been considered normal. In the midst of a battlefield, they were surreal. That's the mood director Christian Carion wanted to capture, and he does so effectively. For *Joyeux Noel*, he has created a number of fictionalized characters, but the historical events in which their stories unfold are accurately portrayed.

Before the war, Anna Sorensen (Diane Kruger, the Face That Launched 1000 Ships in *Troy* and Nicolas Cage's sidekick in *National Treasure*) and Nikolaus Sprink (Benno Furmann) were lovers. Now, he's a member of the German army and she is visiting with a day pass to entertain the troops. Sprink's commanding officer, Horstmayer (Daniel Bruhl, *Good Bye Lenin!*), is against the idea of her being there - until he hears her sing. Meanwhile, in the French trenches, Audebert (Guillaume Canet, *Love Me if You Dare*) worries about his wife. Pregnant and trapped behind enemy lines, her fate is unknown. In the Scottish trenches, Palmer (Gary Lewis, the father in *Billy Elliot*), an Anglican priest, tries to divine God's will for him in the midst of so much suffering and carnage. Once the truce occurs, these individuals meet between the trenches and discover that war need not leech away all humanity.

Carion's first goal is to exploit the absurdity of war - how people can be shooting at each other one day, joking around and playing soccer the next, then once again picking up their rifles. In war, it's necessary to think of the enemy as sub-human (this makes killing easier), but Carion goes to great pains to remind us that the only difference between sides are the uniforms. Nationalism brought countries into the clash of World War I, but there is no nationalism in No Man's Land on Christmas Day.

The movie's weakness comes late in the proceedings. The story concludes 20 minutes before the movie ends. The final portion of *Joyeux Noel* is rambling and long-winded. Ian Richardson shows up as an Anglican bishop whose purpose is to give a sermon that hammers points Carion has previously made in a more eloquent and subtle fashion. Attempts occur to give each little drama a coda, when such things are unnecessary. Ultimately, *Joyeux Noel* is more about the event than it is about the participants.

The film was nominated for a Best Foreign Film Oscar in 2006, but lost to *Tsotsi*. Nevertheless, it's impossible to deny the power of the story and the way the themes resonate across the ages. The

messages of *Joyeux Noel* apply not only to World War I, but to wars of all kinds from the dawn of history until today. War is one of the central conundrums of human existence. Carion does not attempt to explain it, but he shows that, under the right circumstances, human beings are capable of overcoming their base instincts and rising to a higher level, if only for a short time. Historically, the Christmas truce of 1914 was a curiosity that had no lasting repercussions. It makes for a fascinating exploration of the human experience.

