

CROSS OF IRON

In early 1976, Sam Peckinpah was in an alcohol- and drug-fueled freefall. THE KILLER ELITE had been released to lukewarm reviews and indifferent box office, and he was in his usual panic about being in production on his next film before the fallout from his previous venture compromised his ability to get another one started. He was still somewhat in demand, his name and notoriety counting for something, but the old Sam was vanishing fast—receding into an increasingly dysfunctional stupor. Amazingly, A-list vehicles still headed his way—SUPERMAN and KING KONG among them—but even after meetings with the Salkind Brothers, and Dino de Laurentiis, respectively, he felt he couldn't accept. What did he know about 40-foot gorillas or caped crusaders? In the end he stuck with the tried and trusted: men battling for survival, battling each other, battling authority—in other words, war—in all its terrible forms.

Based on Willi Heinrich's novel, The Willing Flesh, CROSS OF IRON encompasses many of the themes consistent with Peckinpah's best work: betrayal, hatred of authority, redemption in the face of catastrophic adversity. It also, in common with many of his films, was born in the fiery furnace of chaos—the production almost subsumed in a welter of financial, personal, and practical difficulties. The producer, Wolf Hartwig, an incompetent dilettante, was a cut below what even Peckinpah was used to dealing with, and the enmity between the two men was unbridled. Hartwig, like many of those unprepared for life with Peckinpah, did not have a clue how to deal with the situation, and his amateurishness in not furnishing supplies, equipment, or viable locations cost the veracity of the project dear. Allied to that, of course, was Peckinpah's recalcitrance, drunkenness, and boorishness, which helped push the production to the brink of disaster. How this muddled enterprise even got rolling is a mystery, despite its beginning with a screenplay nominally by Julius J. Epstein, scribe of CASABLANCA among other things, although precious little of Epstein's original remains in the finished product. Yet get rolling it did and against all the odds, the finished film is not without interest.

The plot of CROSS OF IRON is simplicity itself. During the battle for the Taman Peninsula in 1943-44, the Russians were pressing the German army into full-bore retreat. The horror of the Russian "front" was an unspeakably brutal aspect of World War II, and the German army, spread terribly thin by having to defend too many positions, was crumbling. Corporal Steiner (James Coburn) is leading his disgruntled platoon back to a tenuously safe area, although the safe places are few and far between. Into this maelstrom comes Captain Stransky (Maximilian Schell), an arrogant officer hewn from the Prussian aristocracy whose one desire is to secure for himself the Iron Cross, the highest military honor awarded for bravery in the field. Needless to say, Stransky is an undeserving coward who intends on getting his due regardless of the cost to the men under his command. Steiner and Stransky lock horns, their mutual hatred and distrust for each other infecting and corrupting all around them.

Mirroring Peckinpah's battles with Hartwig, the plot became a metaphor for the bedeviled filmmakers whose own war superseded the one on screen. It is

a minor miracle that CROSS OF IRON is even a watchable piece of entertainment—yet it rigorously captures the insanity of men under extreme physical duress, with moments even reminiscent of THE WILD BUNCH. Despite the low budget and limited resources at his disposal, Peckinpah conjures a believable panoply of war's vicissitudes—its desperation, disgust, and extreme violence—with a painter's eye for canvas and detail. His cast—James Mason, David Warner, and Senta Berger, along with the aforementioned Coburn and Schell—deliver solidly, weighting the proceedings with worthy gravitas. The cinematography of John Coquillon (STRAW DOGS, PAT GARRETT & BILLY THE KID) is of superior quality; the lush green of the forests, the grey-blue of the uniforms, the brown-black mud and red viscosity of blood help hammer home the dark-tinged melancholia and endless futility of incoherent conflict.

The film's score is a winner, too, provided not by Peckinpah's usual composer, Jerry Fielding, but by veteran Ernest Gold. The odd construct of the movie's complex financing (it was an Anglo-German co-production distributed by EMI) dictated that certain below-the-line contributors be of European heritage, ruling out the American Fielding, and making the Austrian-born Gold an eligible fit. And a good fit it was. Gold's knowledge of central European music contributed a great deal to the movie's authenticity, with some of the score's best ideas based on children's ditties and early German folk music. The "Main Title" is especially memorable, depicting the rise of Nazism, offset by a disturbing mélange of martial cadences intertwined with an innocent-sounding children's chorus. Standout cues include "The Massacre," which features the full in-film statement of the powerful theme for Steiner, achingly played over images of his platoon's slaughter at the hands of Stransky's puppet, Captain Triebig (the version of "Steiner's Theme" that opens the CD is a "concert" suite); "Mikael's Death," the incident that sets in motion the machinations of the plot; "Eva," the brief interlude for James Coburn's short-lived romance with Senta Berger; "Last Confrontation," which powerfully sums up the preceding themes and motifs; and "Finale and End Credits," movingly book-ending the "Main Title" reprising the children's chorus, and the haunting elegy for Steiner.

Seen today, CROSS OF IRON is somewhat anachronistic, although the sharpness of its anti-war sentiment still provides a well-timed kick in the gut. Upon its release, the film did good business in Germany and other European territories but fell flat in the United States. In fact, the film is hardly known here at all, appearing now only at special screenings in festivals and on university campuses. It did nothing to halt the decline of Sam Peckinpah's career; he had only CONVOY and THE OSTERMAN WEEKEND left in him, the glories of THE WILD BUNCH left far behind in the dust. One moment cheered the battered director: shortly after CROSS OF IRON appeared, he received a hand-written note from Orson Welles, proclaiming the movie "the finest anti-war film ever made." High praise from a man whose own legendary achievements had taken place in the dim and distant past.

One abiding memory from the set is this: Sam Peckinpah sitting in his director's chair trying to conjure an improvised ending for the film. He had shot the

version that ends the movie, but he wasn't satisfied. He wanted something more. Shouting instructions, he called for cranes, props, explosions, the works. After carrying on for some minutes, he became alarmed: nothing was happening. One of his faithful assistants, property master Bobby Visciglia, leaned over and gently whispered: "Sam, Sam, we wrapped the production yesterday. The crew and the actors have gone home. The film is finished." And it was.

— Nick Redman

GOOD LUCK, MISS WYCKOFF

Based on the 1970 William Inge novel, GOOD LUCK, MISS WYCKOFF, was brought to the screen in 1979, although the movie-going public stayed away in droves and the critics gave the film a big raspberry. Set in the fictional town of Freedom, Kansas, book and film tell the story of Evelyn Wyckoff, a lonely, depressed 35-year-old high school teacher. She is in therapy but is making no progress. One day after school, she is raped by an African-American janitor; feeling ashamed and scared of public disgrace she remains silent. He continues to force himself on her and she, in her very confused and agitated state of mind, begins looking forward to their assignations. The film had a screenplay by Polly Platt, who was, at the time, a well-known production designer for film, having done THE LAST PICTURE SHOW, WHAT'S UP, DOC, and PAPER MOON for her then-husband and then ex-husband Peter Bogdanovich, as well as THE BAD NEWS BEARS and the Streisand A STAR IS BORN. She certainly was no stranger to controversial subject matter – the year before GOOD LUCK, MISS WYCKOFF she'd written the screenplay for Louis Malle's PRETTY BABY. WYCKOFF was directed by prolific TV director Marvin Chomsky. It starred Anne Heywood as the title character, Donald Pleasance as her therapist, along with a terrific supporting cast, including Robert Vaughn, Earl Holliman, Carolyn Jones, Ronee Blakely, Dorothy Malone, and R.G. Armstrong. Kevin Thomas of the LA Times called the film "perfectly dreadful" and that pretty much was the consensus.

But whatever one thought of the film, the one completely successful element was its gorgeous score by Ernest Gold. His main theme is one of his loveliest, filled with the loneliness and yearning of the title character. Gold had an undeniable understanding of character and story and how to make his music enhance and illuminate, and his finest scores are textbook examples of how film scores should work – EXODUS, INHERIT THE WIND, ON THE BEACH, THE YOUNG PHILADELPHIANS, PRESSURE POINT, IT'S A MAD, MAD, MAD, MAD WORLD – and CROSS OF IRON and GOOD LUCK, MISS WYCKOFF are two of his best.

— Bruce Kimmel