




FILM: **QUO VADIS AIDA?**

FDG RATING: 4.2 

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Jasmila Zbanic: *director, writer*

Jasna Đuričić: *actress, Aida*

Boris Isokovic: *actor, General Ratko Mladic*

DATE: May 16, 2021

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **QUO VADIS AIDA?**

An Oscar nominee for best international picture, the film set in Bosnia in 1995, is written and directed by Jasmila Zbanic who was a teenager in Sarajevo during its siege by Serb forces in the 1990s. Srebrenica was designated a “safe zone” by the U.N. Security Council in 1993, in the early stages of the war in Bosnia. Thousands of Bosnian Muslim civilians took refuge at the U.N. base in Srebrenica, entrusting their lives to the international community. In July 1995 Srebrenica was overrun by Bosnian Serb forces.

We see everything happen through the eyes of Aida, a middle-aged ex-schoolteacher working as a translator for the Dutch UN peacekeeping forces in Srebrenica. She is sharp, aware, quick-thinking, and slow to scare but wise enough to know that the current situation is very unstable and if the UN forces do not exercise force to prevent the Serbs from advancing, their town could be quickly destroyed. We see her sitting at a meeting table in a room in the UN military base as she translates for the leaders from her town as they plead with the UN officials to take action. And she translates their response that they have issued an ultimatum. But the mayor reminds the officials that the previous ultimatums have gone unheeded and the Serbian forces have continued to advance and are now on their doorstep. Surrounding the barbed fence of the UN base are thousands of Bosnians who have fled to the base seeking shelter and protection. We hear bombs explode nearby and see Aida's husband and two sons frantically gathering their belongings from their home and running to the UN base as Aida climbs several structures to be high enough to scan the crowd as she looks for them to try and get them inside the base.

Throughout history, narcissistic men who thrive on power and unflinching loyalty, are able to attract dedicated followers willing to commit atrocities on the whim of their leader. General Ratko Mladic (a more than convincing performance by Boris Isokovic) is such a monster who arrives at the base with his Serbian forces offering bread and chocolate to the thousands of townspeople, and even brought his videographer for propaganda purposes.

A few discussion participants didn't want to watch a film about war atrocities. But there is only one scene where we actually see a massacre when a room of men and older boys who have been separated from their families and told they would be transported to safety, are executed. But more shots are continuously heard while hundreds/thousands of women and children are loaded into Serbian busses, also promised they would be transported to safety, but we know, just as the Jews in Nazi Germany were loaded onto trains, safety was not the final destination. Even the UN doctor relays to Aida that trucks have left with the wounded but none have arrived at the hospital. Zbanic purposely avoids showing graphic bloodshed on-screen. As one critic observed, she seeks to convey the magnitude of an historic tragedy — the worst European massacre since World War II — without turning violence into spectacle.

Throughout the film we are on the edge of our seat, frustrated and angry at the UN officials who are so weak and ineffective. They can only allow a limited number of townspeople inside their facility and have no food for them, no toilets. It is an obscene failure on the part of the UN. In reality, the genocide in Srebrenica of July 1995 claimed over 8,000 lives in 10 days. Thousands of women were raped.

Several discussion participants commented sadly that history repeats without peace lessons being learned. Another pointed to the flaws of human nature that continuously produce power mongering evil individuals who want to destroy anyone who obstructs their pursuit of complete control and anyone who does not meet their ethnic standards. The masses who fall victim to their charismatic lies, charmed by promises of better lives, enable these ruthless individuals to rise to unfathomable power.

The camera work highlighted the human aspect of the townspeople as it slowly pans across their faces one by one, first in a flash back scene to a social event where no matter whether they were Muslims or Christians, Serbians or Bosnians, all were harmoniously enjoying the “best hair style” community competition. And then again in a closing scene, when the townspeople are attending a school performance of their children. We see the same faces as parents in the audience offering a glimmer of hope.

It was interesting that the film showed how life resumed after the invasion/genocide. Aida goes to her house where a young Christian woman is now living in her apartment. We recognize many of the belongings in the rooms are Aida’s. The woman has a son who will be in Aida’s class since she will resume teaching again. The tension is palpable. The woman hands Aida a bag with her belongings as Aida tells her to vacate the apartment by the end of the week.

In one of the last scenes we see Aida, along with several other woman, walking through a gymnasium, staring at the clothes laid out indicating the body of a missing person, one after another. She never saw her husband and boys after they were taken away so she doesn’t know if they are missing or dead.

One discussion participant admitted that the film was difficult to watch. Another noted that Aida is like a character in Greek tragedy. And another observed that although there are three religious sects in Bosnia, they all look alike (51% Sunni Islam, 30% Orthodox Christian, 15% Catholic) which adds a feeling of confusion. Another comment was that the movie got it right, the feeling of confusion in the middle of the conflict. And the movie brought you into Aida’s heart as she does all she can to get her husband and sons to safety. Several thought Jasna Đuričić’s performance as Aida deserved an Oscar for best actress. Others thought the film deserved an Oscar for Best International film. As one published critic noted, “Quo Vadis, Aida?” is the kind of film that has been historically neglected by the awards — it is directed by a woman, about a woman and focuses on Muslim war victims. “Another Round”, the Danish film that won the Oscar for best international film, is directed by a famous male director, about men, stars a famous Danish male actor, and focuses on middle-class life. It’s sad that the film by and about the underrepresented could not have received the award. Aida represents thousands of nameless women and citizens whose lives have been damaged by war, but whose stories have hardly ever been told.”

The meaning of the title, literally, where are you going, Aida? or what will you do? was not resolved but some thoughts were that it suggests the quick decisions she had to make under constantly moving impossible circumstances.

A gripping, heart wrenching, realistic, educational story, we mustered a solid 4.2 in support of Quo Vadis Aida on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)



See you at the movies!

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