

Lincoln Film Society

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Friday November 11th, 2016

A War (15)

dir: **Tobias Lindholm**

Starring: **Pilou Asbaek, Tuva Novotny, Søren Malling**

Sponsor: **Dr Roderick Ørner and Michelle Lewis**
Psychological Therapies and Consultancy Services

Can a war criminal be a good man? That's the question at the heart of this utterly gripping drama about a Danish army commander brought to trial for killing 11 innocent civilians in Afghanistan. However much we might want the answer to be simple, writer-director Tobias Lindholm is determined to deny us easy judgements. Instead, he makes us wait, and watch, and look very closely at Company Commander Claus Pedersen (Pilou Asbaek) and ask how, exactly, his war brought him to this terrible crisis.

In many ways, *A War* fits into the prevailing aesthetic of recent combat films, which have increasingly contracted into intimate pockets of claustrophobic intensity. Even mainstream Hollywood offerings, such as Peter Berg's *Lone Survivor* (and even, arguably, David Ayer's World War 2 film *Fury*) chose to focus tightly on the mess and squalor of first person experience rather than bringing out the big guns of large-scale spectacle; the British-made *Kajaki: The True Story* similarly drove home the 'war is hell' message by immersing the viewer in a no-win situation of almost unbearable tension.

Lindholm's post-Dogme adherence to hand-held, naturally lit authenticity takes this tendency to its extreme. He follows Claus's nerve-shredding experience of a war zone in which long periods of boredom are interspersed with sudden moments of brutal terror, embedding the camera tightly into each scene so that it's impossible not to feel every shell that lands, every burst of automatic fire, as a personal assault. This intimacy is not reserved for the battle scenes alone, however, but is applied to everything that passes in front of his lens. He intercuts the Afghan drama with extended scenes in Denmark, where Claus's wife Maria (Tuva Novotny) grinds through the daily battle to bring up their three young children on her own. Domestic emergencies, such as a trip to the hospital to pump the toddler's stomach, receive as much unflinching tension as the Taliban ambush that leads to Claus's fatal decision. With astonishing economy, Lindholm sketches in a whole marriage via a few rushed calls on the satellite phone, and this is essential, since it's Maria's input that proves crucial in the second half of the film, when Claus's trial takes place.

In many ways, *A War* is a companion piece to Lindholm's previous film *A Hijacking* (2012), which similarly juxtaposes claustrophobic menace with a kind of choking banality, and which also cast Asbaek in the lead. As in the earlier film, Asbaek is riveting here, delivering an astonishingly restrained and nuanced performance that locks in your sympathy without ever straying into sentiment. Novotny, too, is compelling, as she deftly locates moments of baffled loneliness within her character's briskly cheerful daily routine (and almost single-handedly provides some female balance in an otherwise male-dominated narrative.) The rest of the cast match the leads' high standard:



Synopsis: *Afghanistan, present day. A small band of Danish soldiers are on patrol in a Taliban area when one of their number is killed after stepping on a mine. Back at base, company commander Claus Pedersen has to pull his exhausted and traumatised team back together with a combination of compassion and clear leadership. But he too is longing for home, where his wife Maria is struggling to bring up their three children alone.. Their young son Julian is in trouble at school, and Maria has to rush their toddler Elliot to hospital after he accidentally swallows some pills.*

Determined to show leadership, Claus decides to go with his men to a village in enemy territory, to rescue a frightened Afghan family who have begged for their protection. The men find that all of the family have been slaughtered and the Taliban has set an ambush. Under heavy fire, one of Claus's men is badly injured. Calling for air support, Claus sends a message that he has visual confirmation of the enemy fighters' position, even though he can't see where they are. A few days later he is arrested for war crimes and sent home to Denmark: he is responsible for the deaths of 11 innocent civilians. Tormented by guilt, he is nonetheless persuaded by Maria to lie about the incident in court, and when his story is backed up by one of his men, he is acquitted. However, his life has been destroyed by the experience.

Credits

Claus Michael Pedersen	Pilou Asbaek
Maria Pedersen	Tuva Novotny
Martin R Olsen	Soren Malling
Kajsa Danning	Charlotte Munck
Najib Bisma	Dar Salim
Luffi 'Laffe' Hassan	Dulfi Al-Jabouri
Figne	Cecilie Elise Sondergaard
Julius	Adam Chessa
Elliot	Andreas Buch Bogwardt
Director	Tobias Lindholm
Written by	Tobias Lindholm
Director of Photography	Magnus Nordenhof Janck
Editor	Adam Nielsen
Music	Sune Rose Wagner
Costume	Louize Nissen
Production design	Thomas Greve

Denmark/Norway/France/US 2015
115 mins

Søren Malling and Dar Salim, who both also starred in *A Hijacking*, crop up again here as Claus's smoothly unflappable lawyer and his best friend respectively, and the three young actors who play Claus and Maria's children, Cecilie Elise Søndergaard, Adam Chessa and Andreas Buch Borgwardt, deserve credit too for their performances in what look like largely improvised scenes.

By rounding out the details of Claus's emotional landscape, Lindholm makes a strong case for a compassionate reading of his split-second decision in the heat of battle, but he stops short of bestowing narrative absolution on his morally battered protagonist. Of, course, had he chosen to tell his story from the point of view of the civilians caught up in the mess, he would have made a very different film; indeed, he seems to make a deliberate attempt to address the lack of an Afghan perspective by giving one local family a key role in the unfolding tragedy. Yet the English translation of the title points to the film's complete insistence on personal contingency - this is just one man's war, Lindholm seems to say, and of course everyone involved would have a different, equally particular story to tell. The very realism of the post-Dogme methods Lindholm adopts ask questions about what reality truly is. Can a film be unbiased? Is the camera a reliable witness? Can it see things from the inside? Even in a court of law, recorded facts may slip away into the gaps between individual agendas and experiences. What makes the film so haunting is the ineluctability of Claus's own self-judgement, a truth that is clearly apparent no matter how carefully he keeps it locked up and out of sight.

Another view

By sheer coincidence, "A Hijacking" narrowly predated "Captain Phillips," Paul Greengrass's (mildly inferior) film on the same subject, which might have helped its ancillary prospects in the long run. In writing "A War," on the other hand, Lindholm can't have been unaware of the crowded subgenre he was tackling: The soldiers may be Danish this time, led by compassionate commander Claus Pedersen (Asbaek), but the pic's evocation of life on the not-all-quiet Middle Eastern front chimes in with comparable portraits in such films as "The Hurt Locker," "Lone Survivor" and last year's underseen "Kajaki: A True Story."

That these tense glimpses are evenly alternated with vignettes from Pedersen's home in Copenhagen, where his wife Maria (Tuva Novotny) faces the daily strain of raising three young children unassisted, isn't especially novel either. Nevertheless, any initial thoughts of Susanne Bier's "Brothers" are swiftly banished by Lindholm's delicately realist, melodrama-free approach to everyday domestic strife. In these scenes, Lindholm constructs a layered, insightful marital study entirely with negative space: Pedersen's practical and emotional influence in the household is achingly evident in his absence. Lindholm also elicits a remarkable trio of performances from child actors Cecilie Elise Søndergaard, Adam Chessa and Andreas Buch Borgwardt: far from standard cute-kid reactions, each one articulates familial longing and frustration in different, all-too-recognizable ways.

As such, human authenticity can never be derivative, and "A War" is a film that thrives on empathy and belief — even as those very virtues in its characterisation account for tricky moral complications as the narrative develops. In short, telling strokes, Lindholm and his ensemble establish a firm, unsentimental sense of brotherhood among the men of Pedersen's company, stationed in a remote Afghan province vulnerable to Taliban attacks. After one soldier is mortally wounded in a landmine accident, Pedersen responds to another's nervous collapse not with up-from-the-bootstraps orders, but a sincere heart-to-heart and a cup of coffee. The commander's fundamental decency may make him appear to be a model soldier, but he's not an infallible one. During one panicked round of crossfire in an Afghan compound — realized with nightmarish visual and sonic vigor that veritably rattles the bones — he makes a risky judgment call that results in the death of 11 locals.

At this point, the film's democratically separated parallel tracks join in unexpected fashion, as Pedersen is called home to face charges for bombing a civilian site. Cue a sparser but no less riveting conflict in the

courtroom, as our hero is caught between his own integrity and the needs of his family. To reveal more of the trial would be to spoil Lindholm's expertly paced unfolding of the case's complexities, though as protocol is pitched against principle, not all viewers will necessarily be rooting for the same outcome.

Beautifully acted across the board, "A War" serves as a particularly gutsy, internally roiling showcase for Asbaek, who so impressed as a resourceful hostage in "A Hijacking." His stoic, gentle demeanor can't always mask profound flashes of pride, insecurity and terror; it's a performance that earns the right to ever-so-occasionally lose its cool. As his wife, Novotny avoids hackneyed stances of long-suffering strength, exposing Maria's raw wound of need and desire right alongside her weary resilience. More functional roles are still inhabited with texture and wit: As opposing lawyers, Charlotte Munck and Soren Malling (another alum of Lindholm's previous pic) give the courtroom scenes personal, high-stakes crackle.

As in "A Hijacking," editor Adam Nielsen is an invaluable ally to the writer-director's no-frills brand of storytelling, his measured back-and-forth cutting finding subtle rhythmic variations and silently mounting momentum in a structure that seems prosaic on the surface. D.p. Magnus Nordenhof Jonck places his camera with maximum, character-framing care even at moments of pummeling chaos; Morten Green's crisp, resonant sound design gives intimate interior scenes as much tension and punch as the breath-holding war-zone sequences. We may still not be able to imagine precisely what it's like out there, but Lindholm's spare, sensory technique does a fine job of inserting us, however fleetingly, into the lives of others.

Guy Lodge: Variety

Our next film: November 18th, 7.30pm Tangerine (USA 2015. Cert 15)

If you can overlook all the hype that attended its first appearance at Sundance 2015 regarding the way it was shot, then *Tangerine* provides a richly rewarding, original film experience.

Sean Baker's small-scale drama centres on 2 transgender prostitutes with a relationship problem to solve. It creates a remarkable sense of place, fizzles and crackles with 'as-it-happens' liveliness and at the same time tells a story of friendship and solidarity - with a truly touching ending - that more than transcends the setting and the fact that the leads are non-actors.

Arguably, not since Spike Lee and 'Do The Right Thing' has life on the street looked, felt and sounded so full of energy and truth.

NB - this film contains strong language throughout.