

## 'Pianist' hits all the right notes

Wladyslaw Szpilman's tragic true story portrayed in tune with director Roman Polanski's own life

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Wladyslaw Szpilman (Adrien Brody) catches the viewer's eye, standing isolated and stricken as he is in the streets of the Jewish ghetto in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. COURTESY FOCUS PICTURES

Two unanticipated interruptions put major dents in the shape of Wladyslaw Szpilman's life.

In Warsaw, 1939, the internationally renowned pianist's performance of Chopin's "Nocturne in D Minor" on Polish state radio was interrupted by a bomb dumped by a Nazi plane. Six years passed, during which Szpilman suffered unimaginable loss and pain, before he was able to play again, and this time finish, Chopin's "Nocturne" on Polish radio.

But he did. And in 1946, when the war was over and Szpilman's frank memoir, which elucidated his experience as a Polish Jew in Warsaw during the Holocaust, was complete and published, its distribution was swiftly suppressed. Communist authorities banned the book, and more than 50 years passed before Szpilman could freely publish and distribute his book -- thanks largely to the efforts of his son.

And despite the half-century interruption, it did get published. Since its release in 1998, "Death of a City" has been translated into several languages, winning much acclaim for the 80-something Szpilman, who passed away in 2000.

The memoir's latest language is film, and director Roman Polanski ("Rosemary's Baby," "Chinatown") has on every account done the story justice. Although Szpilman's book was written with little time for retrospect -- immediately after World War II had ended -- the film version reads like a painful, long-hidden memory that has finally had layer upon layer of its dust swept away. It's as though Polanski has superimposed his own aged memories onto those of Szpilman without losing sight of Szpilman's unique story. Himself a survivor of the bombing of Warsaw and the Krakow ghetto, Polanski clearly has put his whole being into the making of this film.

The same goes for New Yorker Adrien Brody ("The Thin Red Line," "Restaurant"), who turns in a performance that both wrenches and warms the heart. The next Tom Hanks, no doubt -- Brody not only learned to play classical piano for the film, but also lost a hefty portion of his body to become the gaunt Szpilman. But in the end, it's not these accomplishments that make the difference, although his painfully thin face is enough to make anyone wince. Without Brody's convincing performance, there would be no film. His portrayal of Szpilman sticks in the mind and will return, ghostlike, again and again.

"The Pianist" is a film meant to be seen, as it should be, and so the language choice of English is forgivable. What isn't forgivable is the use of German whenever Nazis speak. It serves only to make the German soldiers appear more foreign, more alien and more demonic. Certainly, this is how the Polish Jews must have seen the Nazis, but is it how the audience should receive them? The choice is concerning, especially in light of President Bush and his "evildoers," as a simplification of a complicated situation into "good vs. bad" terms, even as other aspects of the film reject that notion.

One individual's experience always will be more powerful than any retrospective historical interpretation of a time period or group of people. As a survivor and witness of the Nazi occupation, Polanski understands this.

History has no established plot line and generally doesn't need to be dramatized. The language issue is the only betrayal of authenticity of which I'm aware, with the exception of necessary omissions for time's sake. But of course, I wasn't there, so my authority on accuracy is minimal.

I can say that thankfully, "The Pianist" makes few attempts to Hollywood-ize an already incredible true story. Peripheral characters, while well developed, rarely impose upon the focus on Szpilman. There is little closure: most of these characters do not reappear, and we are left to assume the worst. And while there is a love interest, the knowledge of her existence is not what keeps Szpilman alive during the toughest of times.

What, then, keeps him alive, when so many others succumb? The few handfuls of rice and beans he is able to find in his hometown after it has been for all purposes demolished. Dirty, stagnant water left in washbasins for years. The help of Polish music lovers. The sympathy of a German officer. Destiny, if you believe in it. Luck, certainly. But above all else, hope.