

*Divided We Fall* (2000) Directed by Jan Hřebejk, written by Jan Hřebejk and Petr Jarchovský)

The formula for a best foreign film nomination these days seems to be finding humour in the Nazi occupation. Following *Life is Beautiful*, this year's nominee, *Divided We Fall*, might have been sub-titled *Life is Complicated*.

Foreign occupation of your country forces difficult moral and practical choices on everyone. In his political novel, *The Plague*, Albert Camus had analyzed the ways that individuals respond to evils such as Nazism. Do you resist in the name of a progressive political ideology? Passively acquiesce? Blame the gods for your misfortune? Seek personal gain? Actively collaborate? In Camus' existential world, freshly delivered from the Nazi plague but plunged into the Cold War, the answer is none of the above. The individual can only act, day by day, to do the "right thing" in the moment. Camus was disillusioned with all claims to political and social truth.

In *Divided We Fall*, director Jan Hřebejk unfolds a story of individual politics set against the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. At another time, this would have been a movie about resistance and collaboration; about the struggle to stand up against oppression. Hřebejk, however, is as disillusioned by politics as Camus had been. The year 1945 marked not liberation for Hřebejk, but the passing of Czechoslovakia from the Nazi to the Soviet empires. You cannot celebrate the heroics of those who resisted the Germans and allied with the Reds for betraying their country to another enemy. Still, a powerful movie could be constructed around a set of people who make different moral choices in difficult circumstances. We could come to understand peoples' choices in their socio-political context and in relation to their strengths and weaknesses without ignoring the evil some perpetrated, even in apparently good causes.

*Divided We Fall* isn't intended to deliver these insights. This is not a truth and reconciliation movie. The title slogan, which begins "United we Stand", is profoundly political, reflecting the power of resistance to tyranny that resides in numbers and solidarity. The larger political metaphor is missing from this movie. There is no active resistance; the collaborator is banal; and the hero, like Camus' model, acts only in the moment for personal reasons. Individuals are caught up in the impersonal machinations of history and they face the prospect of perishing, each alone. Hřebejk's title repudiates the Western ethic of looking out for number one, but in post-Soviet Eastern Europe, the alternative of collective resistance is unfashionable. All that is possible, the film says, is that we should look out for our neighbours.

On the eve of the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, Hřebejk introduces a trio of good-natured friends, not above playing the odd practical joke on each other. The protagonist is Josef Cizek (Boleslav Polivka), the "Czech everyman" of the movie, who is married to the attractive Marie (Anna Siskova). The couple is childless because, as we learn at the appropriate time and for the appropriate reason, Josef's sperm count is too low to measure. Much of the plot of the film revolves around this biological contrivance.

Josef and his friend, Horst (Jaroslav Dusek) were employees of Herr Weiner, until Weiner and his family are deported to a concentration camp. As the Nazi curtain descends, Josef buries his head. His strategy to survive the occupation is to endure. He no longer works and spends a lot of time sleeping, a depressed observer of the world he no longer knows. Josef is as impotent politically as privately.

Horst chooses to collaborate. He compiles inventories of confiscated property, making him complicit – even if one step removed – in the Nazi terror. Horst shares some of the fruits of

his complicity with Josef and Marie, especially with Marie. He has designs on her, though for the better part of the movie he simply waits for her to reciprocate. He has chosen the winning side in the war, he thinks and, in time, he will surely win Marie as well. After all, he is not only a generous benefactor, he isn't impotent.

Then, unexpectedly, Josef and Marie acquire a "son" – a Jewish son-in-hiding. David Weiner (Csonger Kassai), the son of Josef's former employer, escaped from the Nazis and returned to his home town to solicit help. He is about as welcome as the plague. A neighbour, afraid of being caught in the Nazi web, denounces David in the street – "Jew! Jew!" Josef, the apolitical everyman, is forced to make a decision that is personally dangerous. He tells David that he cannot stay, but offers to drive him out of town. It is the only way Josef can see to preserve his skin and the appearance of integrity at the same time.

With David folded uncomfortably in the trunk, Josef heads through town. Inevitably, he doesn't quite make it. A German car has broken down in the rain. The officer hails Josef, who has to retrieve a tire wrench from his trunk. The Germans don't see through his nervousness, don't enquire about his night-time errand, and are thankful for his rather inept assistance. A situation fraught with tension is relieved by incongruous humour.

There is nothing for it but to take David home before they run into worse trouble. So Josef becomes a hero despite himself, sheltering an escaped Jew in a pantry off the kitchen. Josef's anxieties have suddenly multiplied. He has to keep David's presence a secret while finding enough food for three without arousing the suspicion of the Nazis, of his friend Horst, or the neighbours who would, he knows, denounce him to ingratiate themselves. To make matters more complicated, Horst habitually drops in unannounced to visit Marie. David has to remain out of sight and completely silent, cooped up in the pantry, lest he be out of his closet at an inopportune time.

To deflect attention from his "family", Josef reluctantly agrees to accept Horst's offer of work, and begins to assist in the confiscations. That leaves Marie alone with David who, unlike Anne Frank, is already mature and yearning. The two recluses develop a sympathy that, perhaps, is a little bit more.

During one of Horst's surprise visits – he knows Josef isn't home – David is out of the pantry and has no time to scuttle back inside. Marie, conveniently ill, hides David in her bed, a scene Hrebejk plays as a bizarre skit of slapstick. On his knees by her bed to importune Marie's heart, Horst clutches her hand – except it isn't Marie's, it's David's. Once more, a scene that threatens the conspirators with exposure is played for a gag. Horst is a collaborator, but Hrebejk is sympathetic to those who acquiesce to the new masters if they don't personally abuse their connection to authority.

Horst, though, suspects and snoops. He overhears David breaking the talking ban, coaching Marie in French. Horst's dilemma is that he is infatuated with Marie who is equally guilty of harbouring the fugitive. He can't inform on David without harming her. The solution, Horst determines, is to be found in Marie's childlessness. It is one of Horst's responsibilities to billet German officials. He knows that Josef and Marie have a spare room – and not only no child, but no possibility of having a child. If a German moves in, David will have to move out.

Now it is Marie's turn to save the situation. Desperately, she tells Horst that she cannot possibly have a houseguest because she needs the extra bedroom – she is pregnant. Horst, astounded by Marie's apparent immaculate conception, backs down. But this lie is a temporary respite. Marie will be discovered. Again, the situation is played out for its comic value. Since

Josef is a poor candidate as a sperm donor, that leaves young, virile David. David has again to crawl into bed with Marie, this time in earnest.

The situation comes to a head nine months later, with the Red Army advancing on the Czech town from the east. The Nazis are cleaning up before cleaning out, searching house to house. Horst has backed the wrong horse and is about to reap a personal dilemma from his early opportunism. First he equivocates; then he has to redirect his opportunism. Horst's collaboration provides new dividends when Nazi soldiers are about to search Josef's house. He uses his authority benevolently to vouch for Josef and Marie and obstruct the search. Their house is spared and their resistance remains secret.

As the Germans flee, the Red Army sweeps over Czechoslovakia. This is not, Hrebejk implies, much of an improvement. The Germans have been more like a joke; it is the Russians and their Czech allies who are depicted as violent, taking revenge on individual Nazi collaborators. For Josef, time has grown as short as the interval between Marie's contractions. Desperate, he has to plead to the local Commissar for access to a doctor—apparently, the midwives were busy. Josef no sooner lifts his head from cover when he is denounced as a collaborator by one of his neighbours who knows that Josef had worked for Horst. No, says Josef, it is a mistake. He is no collaborator. In fact, he has been protecting a Jew from the Nazis, which means he has been working secretly on the side of the resistance. Surely his neighbour remembers David Weiner!

He remembers him all right. The neighbour harbours a dangerous secret: he had yelled "Jew" to alert the Nazi's to David's presence the night Josef took him in. If David talks, the neighbour will be revealed as a coward and labelled a collaborator. If everyone is treated as they deserve, who would escape a whipping?

The Red Army Commissar is baffled. He has to see for himself. On the way to uncover David and substantiate his claim to have resisted the Nazis, Josef fortuitously encounters Horst. Denounced as a collaborator, Horst has been badly beaten and had a large swastika painted on his back. The despicable sell-outs in the film are the ones who denounce individuals to whomever is in power, not those who adapt themselves to survive in the immediate political structure. Personally indebted to Horst, Josef claims he is a doctor and he needs his help for his pregnant wife. The survivors' game of make-believe takes another turn. Horst plays along for his life. The neighbour hedges his bets by acquiescing in the deception. All the bad deeds you have done can be erased by doing a good one.

While Horst plays midwife, Josef searches for David who has escaped from the apartment. David is hiding so well, the Commissar is convinced he doesn't exist, which makes Josef a collaborator who deserves to be shot. Horst could vouch for him, but the Commissar is a materialist. Show me David! At the last moment, David peeps out and the game of hide and seek ends happily. From being Josef's nemesis, David has become his saviour. Even Horst delivers as promised. In the end, the reluctant hero and the pragmatic collaborator are reconciled.

The issue of reconciliation is highly political. In South Africa, the effort to achieve a restorative justice was predicated on uncovering the truth as the basis for forgiveness. In *Divided We Fall*, the larger truth is ignored while individual truths are sacrificed for peace. The Nazi occupation is equated with Soviet liberation; if anything, the communist regime is worse. In Eastern Europe, Hrebejk suggests, we should not look carefully or deeply into the choices and motivations of people who were caught up in these intensely political moments. Is it fair to scrutinize individual actions in difficult circumstances? Maybe, though, those are the only actions that really count.