

Interview: Jonas Armstrong, Simon Dutton are ‘Walking with the Enemy’

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CHICAGO – World War II will never be over, in a sense, as long as it continues to influence the culture or teach us lessons about our contemporary lives. The new film “Walking with the Enemy” is rooted in the Holocaust, but uses the twist of a Hungarian Jew who brashly impersonated a Nazi officer to relocate his counterparts.

“Walking with the Enemy” is inspired by the true story of Tibor Rosenbaum, who led a group of resistance fighters, and saved many Jewish lives through his Nazi officer impersonations, also directing his people to the “Glass House,” an old factory that printed Swiss passports for those Hungarian Jews during the war. The story in the film is condensed and fictionalized through the character of Elek Cohen, portrayed by Jonas Armstrong (known in Britain for his role as Robin Hood, portrayed on a TV series from 2006-09). British character actor Simon Dutton portrays Miklos Schoen, the real coordinator at the Glass House.



Jonas Armstrong as Elek Cohen Impersonating a Nazi Officer in ‘Walking with the Enemy’

Photo credit: Liberty Studios

Both actors came to Chicago for a promotional tour, and sat down for interviews with HollywoodChicago.com. For two different generation of British actors – Simon Dutton was born in 1958, and Jonas Armstrong in 1981 – the respect for the craft, the characters and doing the work is ever present.

HollywoodChicago.com: Why and how, in both of your opinions, do the circumstances and actions of the Second World War – such as what was depicted in the film – remain relevant in our circumstance 70 years later? What lessons do we still need to learn?

Simon Dutton: I think more and more stories are coming out, and they’re always going to be relevant and people will want to hear them. In

particular, this film was about a history I didn't know about. I didn't know toward the end of World War II that the Germans invaded Hungary, so as a project it was educational for me. As we go further along, history is being whitewashed, so we need more stories coming out that are truthful. It's another great story about heroism and courage in the face of such inhumanity. That will always be important.

Jonas Armstrong: When we were doing press yesterday, somebody rightly said in ten years there might not be anyone left who experienced the Holocaust. This is not a bombardment, it is a story that still has to be remembered and be conscious in people's minds, so something this atrocious and barbaric can never happen again. It just cannot happen.

Dutton: World War I was supposed to be the war that ended all wars, but it wasn't.

HollywoodChicago.com: Simon, what responsibilities did you want your character to portray most astutely? What fears did you want him to mask?

Dutton: One of the dynamics about my character of Miklos, who runs the passport printing factory within the 'Glass House,' he represents the voice of reason, as compared to Jonas' character of Elek, who is a young kid living more on the edge. I do mask to a certain extent, but I am willing to confront Elek, and tell him for every few lives he is saving, he's risking the other lives of thousands. Elek's excuse is at least he is saving some people. That's part of the tension between the characters.

HollywoodChicago.com: Jonas, you were doing a multi-layered portrayal in the film, essentially 'acting' as a Nazi officer through the Jewish character you're playing. What was key to getting the right amount of gravitas when trying to convince bureaucrats that you are the authority?

Armstrong: It's about having enough conviction to become his enemy. If there were any doubts or hesitations, then he would have been found out. So I had to go in there with 100% energy and authority. For example, there were scenes in which I had to rescind orders and would get talk back from the Nazi guards. I had to say, NO, these orders are changed, never question a superior officer. It had to be utter truth and authority, that was paramount.

HollywoodChicago.com: For both of you, what do you think we as a society and culture don't know about the state of war that the citizens of Europe and Japan had to endure? What is the vital difference when the wolf is actually at your door?

Dutton: Well, one can only imagine. I've never been through a war, but my family certainly was involved during the UK blitz. My grandfather was in the Polish Cavalry, but never wanted to talk about it. That is another reason why these stories must be told, because so many lived through the war and they don't necessarily want to express what happened.

Armstrong: So much of the occupied territory that the Nazis ruled, before the Allies invaded, was engulfed by damage. And then towards the end of the war, the German cities were reduced to rubble, decimated. The loss of human lives were off the scale. To think about it, it is hard to comprehend.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do either of you think there is a danger about fictionalizing the motives, actions and brutalities of the enemy, because this story was 'inspired' by the truth, or is it just another instance of Napoleon's assertion that 'history is written by the winners?'

Dutton: It's what we touched upon earlier, that history has a danger of being whitewashed, and how important it is for stories to come out that haven't been whitewashed. In terms of this film, obviously it's based on true events. It is a movie, but I'm playing a real character, and the role that Jonas plays is based on the real character. Obviously there is artistic license, but it didn't gratuitously change what actually happened. It is based on truth.



Simon Dutton as Miklos Schoen in 'Walking with the Enemy'

Photo credit: Liberty Studios

HollywoodChicago.com: What personally was the most difficult emotion to communicate when playing these types of roles, and how did you both prepare for those emotions within a scene?

Dutton: There were several difficult scenes just to witness, even though it wasn't the real thing, but emotionally it's still incredibly moving. I remember lines of people being thrown into a truck, and it really got to me as a supporting artist, and it was done with such conviction. There was a young kid in one scene, who had to react with such fear, and it gave me a feeling that was part of the atmosphere. The scenes were easier to do in a certain sense, because this atmosphere was recreated so well.

Armstrong: I had to break up a rape, and that was difficult. But the hardest one to convey was a dinner scene, where I had to pretend that I was in agreement with the men who were my enemy in the film. At that time, through conversation, my character suddenly realizes that his family is probably dead, but still had to stay in 'character' as the Nazi officer. I tried thinking about how I would feel in a situation like that, but at the same time I didn't want to think about it that much. I had to pretend to not react to it. The scene right after I look at myself in the mirror, and it was in that reflection that we see the character holding it back.

HollywoodChicago.com: Simon, in your generation of British actors, what was the assumed path to being a working actor? What schooling or training was expected? What media was the best way to get visibility, and how did you – or your colleagues – best start to get those first auditions?

Dutton: Yes, back in my day [adopts a geezer tone and laughs]...I know it is different now, the kids want a good TV role or movie job quickly. When I came up, you wanted to go into repertory theater [perform many different plays in a short period]. I did a year in Newcastle Rep, and they gave three Equity cards out, and I got one.

My first big play was one that went to the West End [London's Broadway] called 'Another Country.' To give you an idea about that play, Daniel Day-Lewis took over the role that Rupert Everett originated, and Colin Firth took over for Danny Lewis. The play ran that long, and made many careers.

HollywoodChicago.com: Jonas, you are well known for your role on BBC One's 'Robin Hood.' Now that the role is past, what can you be confident about regarding what you gave to that legendary character?

Armstrong: It was the first one with a Northern accent. [laughs, Armstrong was raised in Lancashire]. It was better than Americans playing the role.

HollywoodChicago.com: I guess that is as good an answer as I deserve. [laughs] To both of you then, who are your acting role models, whether famous or not so well known, and what do they inspire in you as performers?



Simon Dutton & Jonas Armstrong in Chicago, April 4th, 2014

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Armstrong: I remember when I was young, watching Daniel Day-Lewis in 'My Left Foot,' and it would be shown at Christmas in Ireland. That was my first performance that I looked at and tried to mimic. My mother liked me to do it, which was weird, but that was that. I love watching his work.

Dutton: Again, I will go back slightly, [laughs] when I younger, and I got to sit in on the National Theater and Ian McKellan's company, and the actors around that time were Anthony Hopkins and Michael Gambon. But the guy who was most inspirational to me is someone who recently passed away, and wasn't that well known, but was a complete lunatic. That was Nicol Williamson, who for me was the most exciting actor I've ever seen on stage.

HollywoodChicago.com: [I asked Nick Frost this question](#) [17] a couple weeks ago, so I’ll ask you both. What perplexes you about the United States and its culture whenever you visit or experience it, even from afar?

Dutton: There are so many different aspects to America.

Armstrong: I’ve only visited here twice. I’m just always happy to be greeted here with people who are happy. Everybody is happy to speak to you, which I think is pretty nice. You seldom come across a grumpy a-hole.

HollywoodChicago.com: What role would the both of you like to play before your career is concluded, either a specific character or a general one, and why?

Dutton: The ones I haven’t played are passing me by every day. [laughs] I’ve always wanted to play the title role in Shakespeare’s ‘Richard III.’

Armstrong: Mine would be, and I’ve been asking since I’ve started, the role of Iago in ‘Othello.’ It’s an enormous role and I’d like a go at it.

“Walking with the Enemy” has a limited release, including Chicago, on April 25th. Featuring Jonas Armstrong, Simon Dutton, Ben Kingsley, Hannah Tointon and Burn Gorman. Screenplay by Kenny Golde. Directed by Mark Schmidt. Rated “PG-13”



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