Jessica Chastain is Steadfast as ‘The Zookeeper’s Wife’

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Jessica Chastain is a memorable and glamorous actress, who continues to challenge herself with in-depth and complex roles. “The Zookeeper’s Wife” is her latest, and her performance outweighs the formulaic based-on-truth story, set during the Holocaust.

That setting covers the years 1939 to the end of the war, in the city of Warsaw, Poland (and yes, it is a film where people speak english with accents). Those vital years in history are framed by the key story, which involves the Warsaw Zoo and the proprietors there. If there is a formula to a Holocaust story – and as a reminder the Holocaust was the systematic attempt to eliminate the Jewish population and other oppressed peoples during the rule of Nazi Germany – then it becomes about the people who stuck their necks out as the rescuers during the era, then get to a point where they are almost caught, and then are lionized after peace arrives again. The evil Nazis, scenes of the ghettos and trains to the concentration camps are all in the film, a reminder of horror not too far removed, and yet nothing new is presented on the topic except for the zoo.

Antonina Zabinski (Jessica Chastain) is the wife of the proprietor (Johan Heldenbergh) of the Warsaw Zoo in the summer of 1939. They are passionate zookeepers, and their attraction is very popular. Even Lutz Heck (Daniel Brühl), a zoologist from Germany, admires the zoo and speaks of collaboration with the couple. Everything changes in September of 1939, when the Nazis invade and occupy Poland.



Jessica Chastain and Friends in ‘The Zookeeper’s Wife’
Photo credit: Focus Features

The zoo becomes a artillery depot during the occupation, and the animals are eliminated. The zookeeper’s family is hunkered down in their living quarters, but the oppression of the Jewish ghettoes in Warsaw becomes daily news. The zookeepers decide that their home will become a hiding place for several Jewish individuals and families, risking everything with the Nazis nearby… including Lutz Heck, who returns as a Nazi officer with designs on Antonina.

The director, screenplay adapter and lead role are all women, and the film has its share of passion, and really fine acting. Jessica Chastain is the anchor, and she provides a locked-in humanity to her title character – she even resuscitates an elephant cub and it’s totally believable. Johan Heidenberg was cast for his character looks as the zookeeper rather than a glam guy, which was totally refreshing. And with a name like Daniel Brühl, it is almost inevitable that he would portray a Nazi at some point in his career. He’s very intense, and gives that intensity to the character he is portraying.

The setting, and the production design of 1939 Warsaw, was impeccable as well. The zoo angle was so intriguing, especially in its use as a hiding place, but after the occupation begins the setting becomes incidental. The action then focuses on the suspenseful operation of the zoo being used as a safe harbor for Jewish refugees. They hide while the Nazi’s are on guard at the zoo, and then Chastain’s character plays the piano to guide when it’s safe to come out of hiding, and to the family’s home. It is based on a true story, and all those elements were so specific they couldn’t have been made up.



Johan Heidenberg and Jessica Chastain in ‘The Zookeeper’s Wife’
Photo credit: Focus Features

What was made up for dramatic purposes, even without knowing the entirely true story, were the circumstances of the refugees. They create a mural in the basement, for example, and decorate it with Stars of David (the Jewish star). It smacked of symbolism rather than reality, especially as the “discovery” takes place takes place later. The courageous acts of oppressed victims of that war certainly took place – there is another scene in which a Seder is done while in hiding – but I think the formulators of such stories need to keep it more authentic, because the real stories are just as compelling in different ways.

The stories of genocide must continue to be told, as to hammer the point home that those who don’t know history are doomed to repeat it. The blueprints for how to oppress and eliminate people resonate from the Holocaust. Those documents of hate must burn in the pit of despair, but their actual stories must keep being told, so it will truly “never happen again.”

“The Zookeeper’s Wife” opened everywhere on March 31st. See local listings for 3D theaters and show times. Featuring the Jessica Chastain, Daniel Brühl, Johan Heldenbergh and Ryszard Zabinski. Screenplay adapted by Angela Workman, based on a book by Diane Ackerman. Directed by Niki Caro. Rated “R”

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