

Edward Zwick's 'Defiance' Drains Strength From Powerful True Story

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 16, 2009 - 9:13am

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Ed Zwick's "Defiance" is a dramatically inert film that misses the mark by allowing its director to play up his notable weaknesses as a filmmaker.

Neither satisfying as the action-driven entertainment that Zwick likes to make nor as an emotional historical epic, "Defiance" is flat and dull, only mildly redeemed by two strong lead performances and the inherent power of its subject matter.

Zwick continues his pattern of falling back on the crutches of the typical action movie - slow motion, rising strings, bombastic explosions, melodramatic monologues - but, once again, he uses them to hold up a plot with inherent dramatic power, thinking that the importance of his subject matter will give his film a weight that he can not. "Blood Diamond," "The Siege," "The Last Samurai" - Zwick values epic scope over all else and misses what needed to be a human story to be effective.

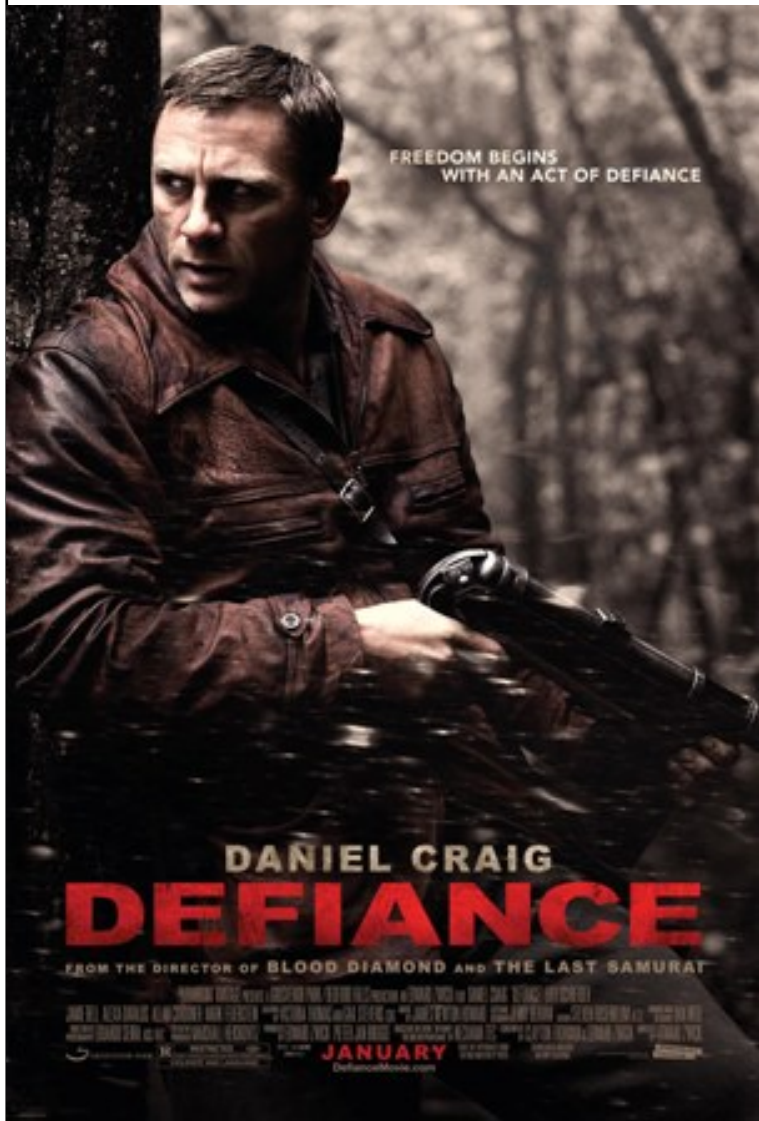


Daniel Craig as "Tuvia Bielski" and Liev Schreiber as "Zus Bielski" star in Defiance.

Photo credit: Karen Ballard

Only his work with his lead actors, his true directorial strength proven by Oscar wins and nominations he directed his stars to in films like "Glory," "The Last Samurai," and "Blood Diamond," saves "Defiance" from being a complete disaster. "Defiance" is a so-so action movie and just because its subject matter is about truly heroic people facing unspeakable horrors doesn't change the quality of the filmmaking.

"Defiance" tells the true story of the Bielski brothers, led by the reluctant Tuvia (Daniel Craig) and the powerful Zus (Liev Schreiber). Tuvia and Zus are joined by their younger brother Asael, who follows their every move but is sometimes caught between the more proactive Zus and the more reactive Tuvia.



In the opening scenes of "Defiance," Zwick reenacts the mass execution at Novogrudok that killed a large portion of the Bielski's family and friends. The first instinct of the surviving Bielskis is revenge, which they get, and then it is merely survival. They gather as many of their comrades as they can find and take shelter in the Naliboki forest where they form a make-shift community. Issues of leadership and the conflict between whether hiding or attacking makes the best sense underscore a complex true story.

Over the years that they survived in the wilderness of Belarus, the community that the Bielskis created and led helped save over a thousand Jews. According to records, the "Bielski Partisans" were the war's largest group of Jewish resisters. It's a story that has not been widely told and deserves recognition.

With the incredible emotions that can be raised just by reading a bit about the true story of "Defiance," it's surprising how easily detached one can be while watching Zwick's film. Most crucially, Zwick never breaks that wall that allows the viewer to feel like they're with these cold, starving, frightened people. The entire film stays at arm's length, hampered by Zwick's dull and predictable filmmaking decisions that drain the survival story of its inherent power.

And the script is a mess, blending awkward action sequences, including a ridiculous one at the end, with numerous scenes of long, boring speeches, interwoven with a Moses allegory. The script is actually a poor fit for Zwick's bombastic style. It feels like he only comes to life during the film's peaks, when he can use his slo-mo and overdone score, but that's a very small portion of the film.

Zwick and viewers of "Defiance" are lucky that actors as talented as Daniel Crag and Liev Schreiber took the lead roles. The first act of "Defiance," which allows for more scenes between Craig and Schreiber, is easily the strongest, as these two actors do very good work. They are powerful and effective, but they are broken up by the true story of the film and Schreiber's character takes a back seat for way too much of it.

"Defiance" is a flat, boring film, but Craig and Schreiber still find a way to break through the action with three-dimensional characters. The strength of the true story and these two very good performances will allow some critics and viewers to overlook the film's deep flaws, but the simple fact is that "Defiance" could have and should have been better.

'Defiance' stars Daniel Craig, Liev Schreiber, Jamie Bell, Alexa Davalos, Allan Corduner, Mark Feuerstein, and Iben Hjejle. 'Defiance,' which was written by Clayton Frohman and Edward Zwick and directed by Zwick, opened in Chicago on January 16, 2009.



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