



MOVIES

'Jojo Rabbit,' '1917' — why do war films always grab Oscar's attention?



Actor-director Taika Waititi and young Roman Griffin Davis star in “Jojo Rabbit,” which tells the story of war as seen through the youngster’s idealistic eyes. (Fox Searchlight Pictures / 20th Century Fox Film Corporation)

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Every awards season, the battle for best picture is a brutal assault. Films claw their way up from the heap of other releases, assailing audiences' senses with marketing and buzz — all to hopefully stand triumphant atop the pile of also-rans, declaring victory.

No wonder war movies are perennially popular this time of year. This season saw five films taking audiences into war zones -- “Jojo Rabbit,” “A Hidden Life” “1917,” a remake of “Midway” and even “The Two Popes” — but not always the battlefields you might expect.

“The easiest way to have maximum effect is to show a bullet entering the human heart,” says Oscar nominee Anthony McCarten, screenwriter of “The Two Popes” and 2017’s Churchill-focused “Darkest Hour.” “But there’s zero emotional impact in someone dying unless we care about that person — that’s where a war story becomes difficult to write.”

Difficult but not impossible, and each of the five films have found their ways in through different routes. Four of the five films are set in the European theater during the world wars, while McCarten’s “Popes” flashes back to Argentina’s Dirty War of the 1970s and ‘80s. Each looks and feels unique, in part because the destruction is shown through not the eyes of politicians or battle-hardened soldiers but those in the middle and on the fringe.

That explains best picture nominee “Jojo Rabbit’s” magical realism quality: Its title protagonist is 10 and a devoted member of the Hitler Youth. He’s in his element, the world is his oyster. “It’s not your drab, worn-out version of Germany you often see,” says producer Carthew Neal. “He’s seeing the world around him as very colorful.”

That was such a 180-degree turn from typical war visuals that the filmmakers had to give explicit instructions while filming in the Czech Republic to spruce things up. “We were shooting in Prague and they constantly have World War II films there,” Neal notes. “We had to encourage the locals to change their point of view — they’re so used to bringing out the wrecks and we were saying we wanted a lot of color.”

Austria is bucolic in “A Hidden Life,” because the war shows up in nontraditional ways. Yes, bombers fly over a small village where there lives a man who refuses to fight in the war. But the battle is more about him against his neighbors, who turn against him.

“The war intrudes slowly,” says producer Grant Hill. “We see it in microcosm. They’re not being bombed; for the most part they’re not being badly treated. But there’s another sort of destruction that can come out of this. The tentacles of the war are still the same.”

“1917” and “Midway” are more traditional war epics, but both tell their stories through the eyes of those enmeshed in it. “Midway” weaves three stories — Japanese high command, U.S. Naval intelligence officers and U.S. Naval pilots — alongside realistic visual effects that writer Wes Tooke hopes will put audiences into the cockpit.

“We’re trying to show this through the perspective of these pilots, in a way it hasn’t been told before,” says Tooke. “I wanted people to understand what it was like to get into a piece of entirely analog equipment, then diving into an enemy ship.”

“1917” follows two young soldiers tasked with a giant responsibility and it’s “locked into their viewpoint,” says Krysty Wilson-Cairns, who wrote the Oscar-nominated screenplay with director Sam Mendes. In the film, the camera follows the soldiers’ harrowing journey. “People rarely make films about WWI,” she says. “We wanted to show how it was fought by everyone, including women. That was far more accessible.”

“Popes,” for its part, is not so much a “war” film — but it does feature a character whose life was shaped by the Dirty War. McCarten’s script focused on the murders of priests and women’s bodies being dumped into the sea rather than direct battles. “How you represent war in any film — you have to make a choice,” he says. “You can show it graphically and at scale, a la ‘Saving Private Ryan,’ or you can take a minimalist approach like the Russian roulette scene in ‘The Deer Hunter.’”

But however a film decides to portray war — from a child’s point of view or a religious man’s — the motive is generally the same, suggests McCarten. “They’re all telling us that war is a dirty business, and when will we evolve as a species to realize that and find other alternatives,” he says.

But Wilson-Cairns suggests there’s another reason we keep going back to our battlefields. “It’s an incredibly muddy world right now,” she says. “These films are comforting in their simplicity. And the main thing war films teach us in general is that we *can* overcome everything. These countries joined together, people from all different walks of life, and showed there’s nothing we can’t achieve — when we set aside our crap and get to business.”

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