



✉ Days Of Glory (Indigenes)



26 June 2006 05:00

Dir: Rachid Bouchareb. Fr-Mor-Alg-Bel. 2006. 125mins.

Best intentions are commendably delivered in Days Of Glory (Indigenes), an earnest, well-produced and thoroughly researched epic saga about those North African soldiers who served with the French Army during World War Two.

Following a quartet of Algerian recruits and their sergeant through campaigns in Sicily, the south of France and their final battle on the Alsatian front, the clear purpose of Rachid Bouchareb's picture is to show how unfairly these soldiers were dealt with by the French Army which, on the one hand, expected them to spill their blood for "la patrie" while on the other treating them as second-class gun fodder.

The cast, including Roschdy Zem, Samy Naceri, Samy Bouajila and Jamel Debbouze, all North African in origin but well established performers in France, are in top form. Their presence will certainly help this multi-national production to both a respectable theatrical career, as well as an appearance at every self-respectable, politically conscious film event worldwide. At Cannes, where Days Of Glory premiered in competition, the film won the best actor prize for its ensemble cast.

The drama opens as agents of General De Gaulle make patriotic appeals in Algerian back streets and villages for young men to sign up – although none of the North Africans have the slightest idea about the war being fought nor ventured more than a few miles from home, let alone stepped onto French soil.

The incentives for the four lead characters to sign up are revealed when they enter training camp. Said (Debbouze) feels it is his duty as his grandfather gave his life for France many years ago, while Messoud (Zem) believes it is the only way out of his miserable lot at home. Abdelkader (Bouajila) hopes that a military career in an egalitarian army means he will receive the same rights as everybody else; Yassir (Naceri) is a mercenary looking to earn money for his younger brother's wedding. The fifth character is their tough sergeant, Martinez (Blancan), a "pied-noir" (the nickname for Europeans living in North Africa) whose task is to toughen them up and prepare them for battle.

Deftly manipulating the relationships between the five characters as they gain in experience and gradually lose their illusions, the script by Olivier Lorelle and Bouchareb ensures that each develops their own distinctive personality. Said is obsessively dedicated to Martinez, who saved his life, while Messoud's affair with a French woman is silently but viciously cut short by military censors. Then there is Yassir's practical change of mind in battle and Abdelkader's devotion to his duties as a corporal that will never lead to a sergeant's stripes, however deserved everyone thinks they are.

Martinez, a classic NCO, is rough and uncouth but dedicated to his men, speaking Arabic and fighting for their rights, although deep down he is as much a racist as the rest of the French army. The authorities kept the "African Army", as these units were known, in different uniforms from the usual troops, subjected them to discriminatory practices and ignored their

sacrifices and dedication.

Days Of Glory makes for a well shot, efficiently cut feature, displaying plenty of action and copiously spiced with special effects and pyrotechnics. It is all effectively driven by a director who may offer no new insights into the genre but who has learned the right lessons from the back libraries of classic World War Two features. The spirit is more than a little reminiscent of Edward Zwick's American Civil war drama Glory and the final act will evoke, for some, a modest version of Spielberg's Saving Private Ryan.

But ultimately, the theme that emerges with insistent regularity is not the horrors of conflict but the bitter irony and absurd injustice inflicted on soldiers who were expected to shed their blood for a land they not only did not know, but which also refused to recognise them as her own.

From the French appeal to the loyalty of the Algerian peasants to defend their motherland in the opening sequence, which may be historically accurate but sounds incongruous to today's ears, to the German pamphlets inviting the African soldiers to desert, the screenplay is peppered with such jarring notes that carry more significance than any of the battles fought in-between.

With pro- and anti-Arab emotions flying as high as they are now in France, and the immigration dilemma an issue worldwide, such a political angle is far more relevant than the war itself, whose character almost becomes immaterial.

Production company
Tessalit Productions

International sales
Films Distribution
French distribution
Mars Distribution

Executive producers
Muriel Merlin

Producers
Jean Brehat
Rachid Bouchareb
Jamel Debbouze

Screenplay
Olivier Lorelle
Rachid Bouchareb

Cinematography
Patrick Blossier

Editor
Yannick Kergoat

Production design
Dominique Douret

Music
Armand Amar
Khaled

Main cast
Jamel Debbouze
Roschdy Zem

Samy Naceri
Sami Bouajila
Bernard Blancan
Mathieu Simonet
Benoit Giros
Melanie Laurent
Antoine Chappey
Assaad Bouab



DAYS OF GLORY

Rachid Bouchareb's well-produced World War Two drama successfully portrays the injustices of war as well as its horrors, says Dan Fainaru