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The 15:17 to Paris (Movie Review)

Abstract

Posting about the movie *The 15:17 to Paris* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-1517-to-paris-movie-review/>

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Comments

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“The 15:17 to Paris” Movie Review

 inallthings.org/the-1517-to-paris-movie-review/

Josh Matthews

February 13, 2018

in things

Title: “The 15:17 to Paris”

Starring: Alek Skarlato, Anthony Sadler, Spencer Stone, Judy Greer, Jenna Fischer

Directed by: Clint Eastwood

Written by: Dorothy Blyskal

Music by: Christian Jacob

The best thing I can say about Clint Eastwood’s new movie, “The 15:17 to Paris,” is that it is a unique experience. Rarely can you say to yourself, as I did during this film, that it’s briefly exhilarating, mostly dull, unintentionally funny, and a fringe candidate for worst movie of the decade.

The movie feels, at times, as if it deserves to be labelled in each of these ways. Taken as a whole, though, “The 15:17 to Paris” is a short propaganda film, spanning 80 minutes of run-time, that’s still about 70 minutes too long.

However, I don’t object to it as a propaganda film. I object to it as a bad propaganda film.

Take Eastwood’s 2014 movie “American Sniper,” which was denounced by some critics as propagandistic and yet was cheered on by American audiences. From seemingly any artistic perspective, “Sniper” is a watchable, at times compelling, movie. It deals somewhat complexly with a few key contemporary themes—personal sacrifice for a difficult military scenario, soldiers dealing with impossible moral choices—and wraps them up in an American flag. Call it propaganda if you want, but it is quite a movie.

Meanwhile, “The 15:17 to Paris” deals with similar God-and-Country themes, but in the dumbest of ways. For this movie, all of red-state America, maybe even all-American patriotism, is reduced to petty militarism, college sports, beer and chicks, hokey prayers, and cheesy views of God. This movie, incapable of a decent line of dialogue, displays either a cross or a flag on every wall in every scene, just in case you don’t notice how gung-ho God-and-Country the rest of it is.

“The 15:17 to Paris” focuses on an August 2015 terrorist attack on a French train, which was thwarted in part by three American men. These men, none of whom is a professional actor,

play themselves in the movie as a trio of friends (Alek Skarlatos, Anthony Sadler, and Spencer Stone).

The train attack lasts for about ten minutes. The rest of the movie shows portions from their lives. We are told in the beginning that the three of them have been best friends since middle school. Then the movie proceeds to show them as childhood acquaintances who separate in middle school and never see each other again, presumably for years, until they take a short trip to Europe together as adults and save the French train.

This is an unfortunate pattern in the movie, which tends to claim one thing via dialogue and then show us something completely different. For example, the characters repeatedly tell us that they are destined to do something special. Most of the movie follows one of them, Spencer Stone, as he seeks to achieve his destiny. He gets in shape via a Rocky-esque training montage, joins the Marines, learns to be a military paramedic, and then does his something-special on the French train.

What about Skarlatos and Sadler? They seem to be mere tag-alongs on the predestined journey of Stone. If you are keeping score, that is only one out of three predestinations gone right, in a movie that wants to tell you that everything is predestined for a reason. (The movie almost completely ignores a fourth hero on the train, an elderly Frenchman. One wonders what his lifestory and destiny was, but alas, the French are not Christian Americans.)

Despite the movie's God-and-Country themes, Christian schools get pummeled. Authorities at the middle school that the three boys attend—represented here by a gym teacher, hall monitor, and principal—are all prickly authoritarians. The gym teacher kicks kids out of class while announcing that he's "in some kind of mood."

The principal is perpetually in that mood. Playing amateur family counsellor, without any moral warrant whatsoever, he tells a single mother that she should stop living with her son and that the son ought to live with his father instead. The mother reacts, appropriately, as if he is a terrorist.

Yet the mothers of Stone and Skarlatos (Jenna Fischer and Judy Greer) receive perhaps the worst treatment of all. They are forced to say silly lines that unintentionally communicate how not-so-bright this movie thinks that the mothers of American heroes actually are. When Stone's mother takes him to the airport, she tells him that she prayed to God and that He told her that—wow, golly gee, get this!—something exciting is going to happen to him. Yes, Mrs. Stone, it is funny how, when God talks to people's feelings, he sounds so much like psychics and fortune cookies. (As it is, I think the moviemakers owe huge apologies to the real Mrs. Stone.)

Skarlatos' mother, meanwhile, gets the line of the movie. When a middle-school teacher tells her that Skarlatos has ADD and that statistics prove that only medication can save him from it, the mother replies—in a line that no actor should ever have to utter—"my God is bigger than your statistics!"

I have some sympathy for the three men who portray themselves here. They do so in an admirably amateur way. But is it vain and self-serving to promote yourself as a hero in a Hollywood movie? On this question, I will defer to the moral philosophers. (Cue La Rochefaucauld: "When vanity is not prompting us, we have little to say.")

However, the three men unfortunately and unintentionally showcase themselves as dumb Americans. I don't say that they are in real life; I just say that the movie doesn't care to promote either their intelligence level or their manners. Before they ride the French train, they parade around Europe as naive American tourists with selfie sticks. In Rome, two of them participate in a "perversion excursion" off-screen, though the camera pauses to look up-skirt on an Italian woman who tells them about this excursion of carnal delights.

The reason that the men saved the train, the movie says, is in part because they engaged in and withstood the effects of such delights. They club it up in Amsterdam, get very drunk, and then hop on the train the next afternoon. In an attempt to get better wifi so that they can upload pictures of themselves, they move up on the train from second class to first class. Again, the moral philosophers can decide whether these men should promote their claim-jumping in the name of their heroism.

As a lifelong middle-American conservative, I do want to thank this movie for perpetuating every stereotype about me that I've ever heard. It's a useful advantage, actually, in real life. Being underestimated leaves a lot of room for surprises and a positive revision of judgments.

What you think hard about, though, is whether the real people in "The 15:17 to Paris" feel proud of the restrictive, reductive ways that this movie portrays almost all aspects of their lives, including their mothers.

That's why I think these three boys were used for military propaganda. If this movie promotes anything, it's a never-ending War on Terror that must necessarily involve good patriotic Christian soldiers. While the movie tries to enlist Christians in this cause, it tells us to turn off our brains and turn on our desires for pleasures. Only then can we thwart terrorists who want to prevent us from taking perversion excursions.

I hope better for these three men. Although the movie would like to say that they achieved their destiny, they have a lot of life to live. Let them strive for better, far greater things, hopefully with the help of wise moral philosophers.