

Warsaw horror

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [January 25, 2003](#) issue

Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* has been hailed as the filmmaker's long-awaited return to the glorious 1960s and '70s, when he made such films as *Repulsion*, *Rosemary's Baby* and especially *Chinatown*. This analysis is flawed in two respects. First, though he has been working in Europe for the past 25 years--after jumping bail and fleeing the United States on a morals charge--Polanski has continued to turn out small but quirky films filled with his always-alluring visual style. (I especially liked his bizarre 1991 effort, the shipbound romantic thriller *Bitter Moon*.)

Second, while *The Pianist* may be the biggest-budget movie that Polanski has tackled in a long time, and while it features a storyline that is both hugely dramatic and close to the filmmaker's heart, it falls short of what we have come to expect from the 69-year-old Polanski since he wowed the international film community in 1962 with *Knife in the Water*.

In 1939, 360,000 Jews lived in Warsaw--about a third of the capital's total population. By 1945 only 20 were left. *The Pianist* is based on the memoirs of one of them, Wladyslaw Szpilman, a famous pianist who miraculously survived the Warsaw ghetto and somehow managed to avoid the trains transporting Jews to the Treblinka concentration camp. His story is inspiring both for its courage and ingenuity, and the book is an especially vivid read since he wrote it soon after he was rescued by Russian troops in 1945.

Szpilman's book was originally titled *Death of a City*, and indeed it draws the reader as much to the story of Warsaw and its transformation under Nazism as to Szpilman's personal story of survival. The film, however, doesn't begin until the city is already under attack. While Polanski is careful to include some of the material about the city as subplots, they are mainly provided as a backdrop to Szpilman's titanic struggle. Though this is certainly a valid approach (the screenplay is by British playwright Ronald Harwood, best known for *The Dresser*), it might have been even more illuminating if the film (like the book) had allowed Szpilman to adopt the role of conscientious witness, filling us in on what was transpiring in back rooms and

behind ghetto walls.

The larger problem with the film is the way Polanski uses the Nazi brutalities to fuel his tale. The first hour of the film is filled with one horrible act after another, as Jews are first humiliated and beaten, then later hanged and shot. One scene shows Nazis throwing a wheelchair-bound man out of his apartment window to his death, while another shows Jews being hunted in the street like dogs. There are so many sequences of victims being lined up against walls and executed that one loses count.

There's no question that these incidents occurred. But that does not mean that showing them in graphic detail, one after the other after the other, is the best way to construct a film. If so, wouldn't all films about the Holocaust be judged by how disturbing and vivid they are?

Polanski's own life may shed some light on his approach. He escaped the Jewish ghetto in Cracow at the age of eight, just before it was destroyed and its inhabitants shipped to concentration camps. (His mother died in a camp.) He wandered the countryside seeking food and shelter, witnessing numerous horrors and atrocities along the way, and was often shot at by German soldiers who laughed to see him jump and crawl for his life.

It is no wonder, then, that Polanski's film expresses loathing for the Germans. The issue is whether, as a filmmaker, he needed to spend so much time showing us something we already know--that the Nazis could be inhuman monsters. I couldn't help thinking that his approach is perhaps a "high art" equivalent of the technique used by lesser filmmakers in which the first half of the movie shows the villains at their most vile so the audience can cheer when they get their comeuppance in the second half.

The film's title (and the revised title of the book) also suggests that Szpilman's artistry is key to the plot. In the film he is ultimately saved by his ability to play Chopin's *Nocturne in C sharp minor*. But Szpilman's book shows that the man who ultimately saved him from the gas chamber didn't do so because he was a music lover, but because he felt that the German army had been wrong all along, and now that the war was ending he felt no need to keep feeding the death machine. In other words, it was a delayed sense of justice, not an appreciation for art, that made the difference.

The Pianist is by no means an unimportant film. The cinematography by Pawel Edelman is rife with smoke and despair, and many of the performances, especially Adrien Brody's as Szpilman, are moving and convincing, as is the production and costume design by Allan Starski and Anna Sheppard (who performed the same chores on *Schindler's List*). It is just not as complete and complex as it might have been. One of the marks of a great artist, which Polanski has proven to be over the years, is the ability to find a unique and, if necessary, difficult route into the issues that matter.

Perhaps it is too much to ask a man who has suffered so much brutality and bloodshed as a youth and a man--including the slaughter of his pregnant wife by the followers of Charles Manson--to take even a small step back from his anger and the ghosts of his past. Perhaps we shouldn't even ask him to try.