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Spectrum

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Beyond prejudice

Controversial filmmaker Roman Polanski's Venice award-winning film An Officer and a Spy could not have come at a better time

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Gautaman Bhaskaran

Polish-French master moviemaker Roman Polanski must be deliriously happy today having won the second most important award at the recent Venice Film Festival, Special Jury Prize, for his An Officer and a Spy (J'Accuse in French) But to many others, the honour came both as a huge surprise, and even a shock.

Argentine auteur Lucrecia Martel, who headed the Venice competition jury, refused to attend a red carpet event before Polanski's movie was screened. But later said she would have an open mind about it, and she did by giving away the prize to the exceptionally brilliant filmmaker, whose life itself reads like a

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the prize to the exceptionally brilliant filmmaker, whose life itself reads like a story that weaves through winter and spring.

In 1978, Polanski fled the US after he was found guilty of raping a 13-year-old girl, who has since then forgiven him and urged the authorities to drop charges against him. He has never set foot in America since that day, and has avoided arrest, though he found himself briefly incarcerated in 2009 at Zurich — where he had gone to receive a lifetime achievement award. He was freed and not deported to America.

An Officer and a Spy in French did not sail into Venice on a note of welcome. There were protests against its inclusion in the festival, but the director, Alberto Barbera, stood his ground. “I am not going to judge the man, but only his creative efforts. When you go to see a painting by Caravaggio, you are seeing a work by an assassin who, after killing a man, had to escape to Palermo. It’s ridiculous. If you can’t make a distinction between the culpability of a person and that person’s value as an artist, you aren’t going to get anywhere”. He has been vindicated by the honour.

Polanski’s film details the Alfred Dreyfus affair, the infamous late 1800s scandal. The French Jewish Army captain, Dreyfus, was accused of spying for Germany, convicted in an awfully biased trial and sentenced to life imprisonment on the notorious Devil’s Island. He was eventually exonerated in trials which laid bare anti-Semitism in the French army and government.

It is not Dreyfus (essayed by Louis Garrel) who takes the centre stage in the movie, but Lieutenant-Colonel Georges Picquart (Jean Dujardin). A Christian French officer, Picquart, who, despite his deep-rooted dislike for Jews, plays a major role in getting Dreyfus’ name cleared. Dujardin exemplifies a wonderful fellow feeling, infusing the character with conviction and honesty. Adapted from a 2013 historical novel by Robert Harris (who co-wrote the script with Polanski as he did The Ghost Writer), the movie sticks to facts and is lavishly mounted.

It was a pleasure to watch the Polanski’s latest creation. It is technically brilliant and takes us into a packed music hall, a bright, colourful cafe, on misty roads and through the Louvre garden in Paris. All this is cheered by composer Alexandre Desplat’s musical score.

Could there have been a better helmer than Polanski to have created this movie? One wonders, given the fact that he lost his family as a child in the Holocaust. And he knew pain even later in his life when his young wife, model and actress Sharon Tate, was murdered by the Manson Family cult in California. She was eight months pregnant. It was 1969, and many termed it the end of Hollywood’s golden period.

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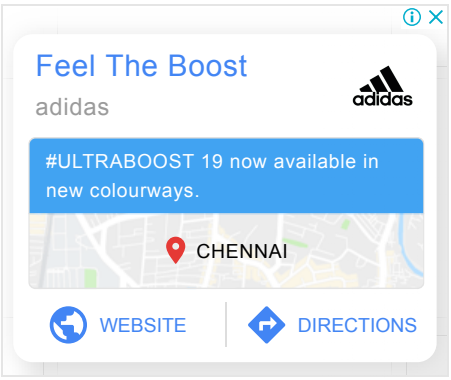

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What is most important is that the film comes at a time when the world finds itself divided and sub-divided by religion and caste. There has been a huge rise in anti-Jewish sentiment in many parts of Europe. In India too, such polarisation in society is rearing its ugly head.

An Officer and a Spy takes us beyond all this to show that the Jew hater, Picquart, saw beyond his prejudices to help a fellow soldier live in peace and with honour.

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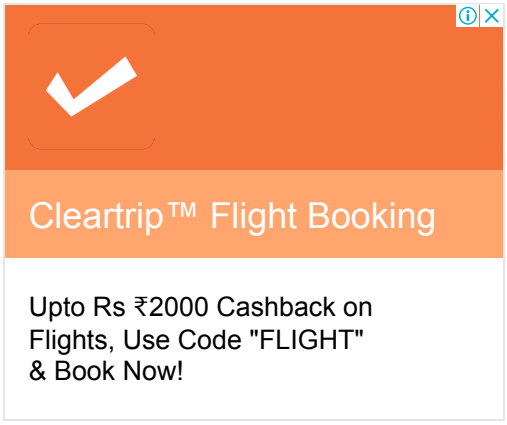

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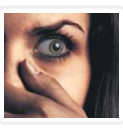

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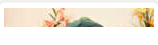

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