

## *Zhivagoesque epic for Nazi-occupied Europe*

*Written by Gerard Soeteman and Paul Verhoeven*

*Directed by Paul Verhoeven*

Carice van Houten ... Rachel / Ellis

Sebastian Koch ... Ludwig Müntze

Thom Hoffman ... Hans Akkermans

Halina Reijn ... Ronnie

Waldemar Kobus ... Günther Franken

Derek de Lint ... Gerben Kuipers

Black Book (from the Dutch *Zwartboek*) is a wonderfully casted and executed World War II movie about the Nazi oppression of conquered peoples that doesn't stereotype anyone. It also doesn't pull any punches about the brutality of the Nazis toward the Jews, the brutality of the Nazis toward any of the locals—in this case the Dutch—who dared to object to this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to worship the Third Reich, and the treachery within the ranks of the Reich's victim classes.

Apparently, this latter quality—that many individuals secretly collaborated with the Nazis, even when they weren't under special duress—is somewhat controversial among some Jewish (and Dutch) viewers, but it shouldn't be: anyone who's been in a concentration camp, just as people who've been in military combat, will tell you there's no way to predict how a man or woman will stand up under persistent threats of force. Simply watch *Saving Private Ryan*... or *Bridge on the River Kwai*. The same guy who cowers in a foxhole one day, the next day takes on a whole brigade singlehandedly. Certainly no ethnic group is immune from individuals caving, too easily, under pressure.

But aside from some PC reservations, this movie doesn't make a false step; it deserves a ranking among the best noncombat World War II movies I've seen—many of which were made in a different era, closer to the war. What distinguishes *Black Book*, for movies war and nonwar, is the lead role: like Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien*, Rachel Stein (Carice van Houten) is a true-to-life heroine. The story is her story, conveyed in a retrospective as Rachel takes a timeout from teacher duties at an Israeli kibbutz of 1956; the sentimental journey is triggered by a tourist who turns out to be a coworker Ronnie (Halina Reijn) of Rachel's in Holland during the Occupation.

Lest I forget, mega snaps to the set designers, wardrobe folks, and camera people for the pure authenticity of surroundings. The clothing, architecture, mannerisms, and language—we get a smattering of German, Dutch, Hebrew, and English, so subtitles are the rule—put you back in the day.

Rachel recalls her experiences from the point, as a Jewish girl, she was hidden by a strict Christian Dutch family. In a series of misadventures she loses her hideaway, becomes the sole survivor of an ambush, and winds up with a new identity in the city (Rotterdam, I think). Then she hooks up with a resistance group, led by Gerben Kuipers (Derek de Lint), with a Victor Lazlo type lieutenant, Hans Akkermans (Thomas Hoffman). The Hans character has that dramatic flair of confidence, conviction, and competence, as I say, reminding me of Victor Lazlo, the heroic Czechoslovakian freedom fighter in the movie *Casablanca*.

But Rachel, now named Ellis de Vries, makes all the right moves to claim the same hero ground as her leading men. Because of her knockout looks, she agrees to do "whatever it takes" to get the confidence of the local Gestapo chief Ludwig Müntze (Sebastian Koch). Which she manages, or sort of. [Note: Sebastian Koch plays the author/playwright in the 10-star movie I reviewed on these pages, *The Lives of Others* (2006).] Anyway, that's the basic setup of the plot, beyond which, out of nongiveaway courtesy, I won't be goin'. But the plot is action packed, suspenseful, clever without being contrived.

What makes this movie match up well with the great ones, though, is its characterizations and subtle exploration of the issues of basic humanity we face to this day. For example, when the Germans are ultimately defeated, retributions in the Dutch cities are carried out in conjunction with a mob hysteria that leads to Abu Graib sorts of incidents—some of the victims, like Rachel/Ellis, being completely innocent. I believe we're informed at the beginning of the movie that the movie is inspired by actual events; it would be hard for actual events not to have some correspondence with writer/director Verhoeven's storyline.

As for Carice van Houten's Rachel, her presence devours the camera, which she's rarely not in front of. There's definitely something about her; when she's on the screen most find it hard to look away. Van Houten transports the audience from fear to anger to sorrow to desire sometimes within a heartbeat; she

reminds us of a Randian heroine without the ideology. No matter what happens she has the gumption to get through it and beyond it; she'll do what needs doin' and keep her sense of humor, her sense of life. She's definitely the most worldly, not to mention hottest, kindergarten teacher at the kibbutz.

There's a depth to the movie, unexpected when you consider some of Paul Verhoeven's work during his Hollywood period. For example, who would believe the director of the farce *RoboCop* (1987), feeble *Showgirls* (1995), and sci-fi blasphemy *Starship Troopers* (1997) would someday be leading a world-class drama such as *Black Book*? I wouldn't, though there are small glimpses of intelligent satire in these previous tinsel town travesties. On the other hand and speaking of small glimpses, Verhoeven directed *Basic Instinct*, quite intelligent by conventional detective-movie standards and a scintillating departure for women in film. Besides, on whom do you blame a dog? Screenwriter, producer, or director?

Verhoeven is the screenwriter for *Black Book*, a screenplay he's been working on intermittently for two decades; with its completion he returns to his roots in Holland. And this movie is not so much a departure for women in film, as a reclamation of strong women roles. Here's a comment by movie critic James Berardinelli:

... it is fitting that the central character in *Black Book* is a woman. And not just any woman - Rachel Stein (Carice van Houten) is a no-nonsense heroine. She doesn't stammer, falter, or fall prey to stupid plot clichés. She does what must be done to solve a problem, whether that's dying her pubic hair blond (that stings!), bearing her breasts to a boorish soldier, or sleeping with an SS officer. She suffers grief and falls in love, but never do her emotions betray her or slow her down. In today's world of dumbed down characters, most men aren't given the kind of respect accorded to Rachel, let alone women.

So it's a good job all around, the action scenes hit you viscerally and the effects are as good as any in the business. There's some nudity; in fact, it's the first time I've seen a movie rated for "graphic nudity." What is graphic nudity, I wondered. Well, no need to spoil the fun. All in all, I wouldn't put *Black Book* in the fun category; like the previous movie I reviewed, *Gone Baby Gone*, it doesn't make you want to believe in Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny... or even look on the bright side of life. However, like *Dr. Zhivago* (without as much of a love story), you're drawn into an epic of heroic struggle, heartache, and survival. Well worth the 2 1/2-hour investment.

###

2007 November 23

Copyright © Brian Wright | *The Coffee Coaster*™

*Black Book* | *Paul Verhoeven* | *World War 2 Thriller* | *Carice van Houten*