

## A War

We may be bone weary of film and television depictions of our Middle East wars, but now along comes a new entry, “A War” from Denmark, which merits a look. This story of a Danish soldier in the war in Afghanistan has rightly been nominated as one of the five foreign language Oscar nominees, and it may come out with a statuette.

Company commander Claus Pedersen (Pilou Asbæk) of the Danish Army and his men are stationed in a barren Afghan province, trying to protect a small rural enclave from Taliban incursions. He is a taciturn but fair leader who has the confidence of his team. Back in Denmark, Claus’ wife Maria (Tuva Novotny) is trying to hold her hectic life together with her husband at war and three young children missing their father. One of her sons, in fact, has a discipline problem at school that just adds to the familial pressure.

During a routine mission, Pederson’s soldiers—with him out front at the point—are ambushed and caught in a panicky, confused shootout. With lives on the line, commander Claus makes a decision that has grave consequences for him, his career, and his family back home. Before returning to Denmark for long deserved leave, Pederson learns he must face an army tribunal investigating his alleged ordering of the killing of civilians. His stalwart army-assigned attorney Martin Olsen (Søren Malling) tries to make the best case for him, while the members of his company and his wife nervously await the judgment of the court.

Danish director/writer Tobias Lindholm first came to attention for US moviegoers through his too-little-seen “A Hijacking” (2012) a highly effective, naturalistic depiction of the taking of a Danish freighter by Somali pirates (well before Tom Hanks assayed the same subject in “Captain Phillips”). “A Hijacking” (which starred both Asbæk and Malling in indelible performances) received both national and international acclaim, winning a critics’ award for Best Danish Film of the year as well as the equivalent of five Danish Academy Awards. With his new film, again striving for utmost realism in a most dramatic setting, he comes through with another winner.

As he did with “A Hijacking,” Lindholm once again concentrates on those closest to the conflict itself. In the case of “A War,” he uses both real Danish soldiers and true Taliban warriors, along with their relatives and refugees, in his quest for realism. He also consulted with relatives of soldiers, an auditor, a defence attorney and a former Taliban figure he met in Turkey, where the film was shot. While in Turkey, he contacted Afghan refugees there and cast some of them.

In the war sequences, only three of the roles are played by professional actors: Asbæk as Claus, Dar Salim as his second-in-command Najib, and Dulfi Al-Jaburi as the soldier Lasse. The rest of the army company were played by

veterans of the Afghan conflict, who all added dimension and understanding to the details of military operations. Lindholm also purposely avoids any overt political stance in his film but rather aims to illuminate the consequences of the war on one unit and one personality.

His filmmaking style of self-control in examining men under pressure comes through in a recent interview, where he stated, "I would always rather say too little than too much. Some films seem to think that people check their awareness in the cloakroom before they go into the theatre. So they serve up all sorts of unimportant details that take up space and become oppressive instead of giving the viewer room to invest their own experiences and get into the film."

That admirable restraint shows in the final product of "A War." Some viewers, used to a more hyped and obvious American style, may find the final courtroom sequences too staid, too cool, but for this reviewer the tone is estimable, providing a fitting climax to a tale told with care and sensitivity.

*(The film is rated "R" and runs 115 mins.)*

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