

Island on Bird Street

US : 19 : dir. Soren Kragh-Jacobsen : min
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:
[Jordan Kiziuk](#) [d]
 Adult cast; two lines

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Alex with snowy, the mouse who is the only point of warmth and fondness in his world

Source: International Film Guide

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on Nirumand, who starred the previous year in Naderi's "DAWANDEH" (or "The Runner"):

"He kept on running in Naderi's "AAB, BAAD, KHAK", a drama of drought set in the parched land of the Iranian-Afghan border. But the Iranian authorities, who had already castigated "DAWANDEH" as a slur on their country, and had failed to get Naderi to apologise for it, now banned the showing of both films. Naderi was granted political asylum

in the USA, and Majid and his elder brother Mansur Nirumand fled into Pakistan."

[no listing in "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "Bloomsbury Foreign Film Guide", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video

Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993",
"Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin
Film Guide"]

As I've commented elsewhere in the archive, the holocaust is in danger of over-exposure, a story so often told that with each new title the effect is inevitably diminished, until it risks being reduced to a modern day cliché of suffering and injustice. As of this moment, February 2003, Roman Polanski's latest film, **"THE PIANO PLAYER"**, is about to go on general release, a story which vaguely parallels the director's own traumatic childhood in the Warsaw ghetto. Every film cannot be a **"SCHINDLER'S LIST"**, but a minor-scale story of anything so harrowing as the "liquidation" of the ghetto seriously risks the accusation of trivialising it.

With these misgivings I sat down to **"ISLAND ON BIRD STREET"**, and for the first twenty minutes I could not make up my mind if this was a film for children or not. The distinction is important, because a lighter touch on this subject would be admissible, if not mandatory, for a younger audience, and the resources available to children's film-makers are inevitably dwarfed by productions for adult consumption. Critics should not patronise children's films, or be over-indulgent toward them (as they generally are) but a different criteria of criticism must be applied all the same.

Soren Kragh-Jacobsen certainly made her name with children's titles, and the opening scenes here do have that feel about them. Alex lives happily in the ghetto with strong-but-kindly father and lovable old uncle, the dialogue between the children playing outside the ghetto rope factory is quite unreal, and nothing intrudes itself in the family scenes which could be described as notably Jewish. Alex is *too* bright and sunny, in point of fact, given that he knows the Germans are hauling off any Jewish children they can find, to that anonymous destination from which only vague rumours return.

The fateful day comes when even the fit and able are rounded up onto trucks. Alex watches his father arrested, and then lovable old uncle sacrifices himself so that Alex can escape into the ruins.

At this point the film changes in character completely. Alex is now the exclusive focus of attention, the insipid voice-over of the early scenes disappears, and the story is left to tell itself of this boy surviving on his wits, alone in the deserted ghetto, for weeks and months. It becomes, pointedly, a Robinson Crusoe story (that's the book he is reading at the time), and his former prison in the walled-up Jewish quarter now becomes his sanctuary and haven from the terror and death waiting just outside. This conceit adds a quite fresh dimension to the holocaust scenario, and since the story – more so than Polanski's – is autobiographical, out of the minutiae of Alex's resourcefulness and ingenuity comes an engrossing film, to the point where the death of his companion mouse, close to the end of the film, is a genuinely moving and tragic moment.

As he waits – and waits – for his father's promised return, Alex does find occasional human contact, as often threatening as friendly, and his story is rich in incidents. He rescues a pair of fleeing men by killing the German soldier who's about to execute them, and helps nurse one of them back to health; he's befriended by a young girl outside the ghetto whose family offer to take him with them when they leave for rural parts; he meets a darkly ambivalent priest working with the Polish underground, and in each of these cases Alex is offered an escape route, but declines the lifeline that is thrown to him. He waits behind, obediently, defiantly, for his father. **"ISLAND ON BIRD STREET"**, in other words, is the story of one young boy left behind when Oskar Schindler's factory is summarily emptied into the forced labour camp of Amon Goeth. It's a different perspective, but not without its own moments of genuine tension and grim understatement.

As a one-boy tour-de-force it is comparable to “**EMPIRE OF THE SUN**”, in which Christian Bale had to carry the weight of a three-hour film very largely on his own shoulders (a disgrace that he received no Oscar nomination for that, flawed though the film was). Jordan Kiziuk similarly has the screen to himself for long stretches, and his own emotional range was similarly stretched. This is a far more modest film of course, but part of the problem with Spielberg’s epic was that it over-reached itself emotionally, and aimed at broad sweep when what was needed was a more intimate, searching study of the boy himself.

There are always gripes. Many of the English accents jar on the ear given the central European setting. It seems unlikely in the extreme that a boy who has known what Alex would have known should weep over the killing of a German soldier. He emerges from a series of narrow scrapes and near-captures completely unscathed physically, even if his will to live has sapped to zero by the end of the film. And the casting of Jack Warden as the uncle (seen again recently in yet another remake of “**THE DOG OF FLANDERS**”) was a definite mistake.

See subject index under **ANIMALS, BOY MEETS GIRL, FATHER’S SONS, RECOMMENDED TITLES** and **WAR**.