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Survival... Love...



BROTHERS

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A hard-drinking ex-con must face responsibility for the first time in his life when his brother is reported missing in the war in Afghanistan in this emotionally powerful, stunningly acted drama from Susanne Bier, the director of *Open Hearts*. Winner of the Audience Award for World Cinema (Drama) at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival.

DENMARK • 2004 • 110 mins • Color • In Danish with English subtitles

A Danish film shows the drive that strong characters can give a narrative.

KENNETH TURAN

Few relationships have as much potential for interpersonal fireworks as the ones between siblings, and few films are as fearless in the face of raw and intense emotions as the compelling new Danish feature called simply "Brothers."

The deserving winner of the Sundance Film Festival's world cinema audience award for drama, "Brothers" has an exact sense of emotional truth and a respect for the intricacy of character. Filmmaker Susanne Bier, who did popular comedies before turning serious with "Open Hearts," has a concern for the nuances of behavior that is as welcome as it is unexpected.

A director who believes "film is about describing emotions and showing feelings," Bier has the audacity to treat those qualities as the natural territory of cinema, something movies should be involved with at all times, not just when the special effects are on hiatus.

Telling the story of how a numbing crisis affects a vulnerable family, "Brothers" focuses on the traits, both positive and negative, that are revealed when catastrophe uncovers previously buried aspects of personality. Its governing notion — that we don't know what we are capable of in terms of both right and wrong behavior — turns out to be an especially provocative one.

These ideas play out in what is in effect two intertwined narratives, a personal drama and a story of men at war, both pivoting around the figure of Michael (Ulrich Thomsen). A husband, father and officer in Denmark's army, Michael is cut from the classic square-shooting hero's mold, but events are brewing that will test him more than he imagines.

"Brothers" begins with Michael learning that he and his men are being deployed to Afghanistan, a situation that upsets both his wife, Sarah (Connie Nielsen), and his two young daughters. Later the same day, he has to drive to a local prison to pick up his brother Jannik (Nikolaj Lie Kaas), just released after serving time for bank robbery.

If Michael has the family's good-son role sewn up, immature, alcoholic Jannik has no trouble playing Cain to his brother's Abel. With one giving well-meaning but poor advice and the other invariably taking it the wrong way, the two are locked into patterns of behavior that it seems nothing can change.

But then Michael goes to Afghanistan, and almost immediately the family is told that he has died in a helicopter crash. Relationships change because he is not there, people transform because of the press of events. But those events refuse to play out as we expect them to; nothing happens the way it seems it must. Even more unsettling, we end up knowing more about things than the characters do, which makes our investment in their choices even more intense.

It's not surprising that the story of "Brothers" is this intensely dramatic: It was written by Anders Thomas Jensen, whose previous credits include such well-regarded films as "Mifune" and "Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself." It affects us as much as it does, however, because director Bier's great sense of restraint doesn't allow us to think that what we are watching is anything less than completely real.



"Brothers" is also strongly cast. As Michael, Thomsen builds on his superb work in both "The Celebration" and "Inheritance."

For actress Nielsen, who left Denmark at age 18 to become an international star ("Gladiator"), this is the film she chose for her Danish feature debut. And Lie Kaas not only handles the demands of Jannik perfectly, he, like his costars, looks exactly the way his character should.

Also contributing to the verisimilitude in "Brothers" is the way Bier and cinematographer Morten Soborg decided to shoot it. As detailed in an article in *American Cinematographer*, the film exclusively used real locations and allowed the actors complete freedom to move anywhere in them and the director of photography the freedom to point the camera at anyone at any time. The end result was that the performances reached a remarkable level of intimacy and intensity.

The sine qua non of "Brothers" is its great sense of narrative drive, the feeling it creates that anything could happen within its contours. Emotions might tear us and the characters to shreds, but it will always be honest. It will always be life.

BROTHERS

Directed by Susanne Bier; written (in Danish, with English subtitles) by Anders Thomas Jensen, based on a story by Ms. Bier and Mr. Jensen; director of photography, Morten Soborg; edited by Pernille Bech Christensen; music by Johan Soderqvist; production designer, Viggo Bentzon; produced by Sisse Graum Jorgensen. Running time: 113 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Connie Nielsen (Sarah), Ulrich Thomsen (Michael) and Nikolaj Lie Kaas (Jannik).

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