

Land of Mine (15) Denmark/Germany 2015

9 January 2023

DIRECTOR: **Martin Zandvliet** (German and Danish with English subtitles) Running time: 100 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Roland Møller** (Sgt. Carl Rasmussen), **Louis Hofmann** (Sebastian Schumann), **Joel Basman** (Helmut Morbach), **Mikkel Boe Følsgaard** (Lt. Ebbe Jensen), **Laura Bro** (Karin), **Zoe Zandvliet** (Elisabeth, Karins daughter), **Mads Rilsom** (Soldier Peter), **Oskar Bökermann** (Ludwig Haffke), **Emil Belton** (Ernst Lessner).

SCREENPLAY: **Martin Zandvliet**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Camilla Hjelm**. EDITING: **Per Sandholt, Molly Malene Stensgaard**. MUSIC: **Sune Martin**.

Shorn of its pun in the original Danish, Zandvliet's unforgettable Second World War film simply bears the title *Under sandet* (Under Sand). The protagonist, Sergeant Rasmussen, is tasked with clearing Denmark's beaches of the mines left behind by its occupiers; his tool for doing so, in a grotesque poetic justice, is a band of German prisoners, who by this stage of the war are little more than boys.

They are given rudimentary training by a Danish officer in the means to defuse a landmine, and then handed over to the sergeant who, as an opening sequence makes clear, has little time for his country's uninvited guests, and regards his charges, one suspects, as justly expendable.

Rasmussen treats the boys harshly at first. He needs a disciplined unit to get the job done, but he also needs a healthy one, and the higher command's dilatoriness in providing victuals soon becomes an overriding frustration. Before long he takes things into his own hands, and gradually his attitude softens. This fact, though expected, is nevertheless subtly graded, and his progress from vitriolic sergeant to surrogate father is by no means a one-way street. At the same time, of course, Rasmussen is renewing contact with his own humanity after years of hardening his heart. It is a brilliant performance.

The German lads, too, are clearly delineated characters; whether it is the boy who misses his mother or the inseparable twins, or the obligatory bully with his taunts, they are rounded creations in the hands of the talented young cast and their director. The scenes in which the two sides bond *in extremis* naturally make up the bulk of the film and are its bread and butter. The director is making the point that even in time of war the human urge towards rapprochement is irresistible, and here's to that. The fact that the would-be conquerors are

children of course makes it easier, which is why Rasmussen has to be such a headcase to begin with.

A word for Camilla Hjelm's cinematography: a rare female DOP, she came up through documentary to feature film work, and that does not surprise. There is a crystalline clarity to her shots of a surprisingly sun-drenched Danish coastline. Reds are bled out to privilege greens and greys, and there is a finesse to both close-up and aerial shots that lends immediacy to the storytelling.

In a way it is a pity the distributors stooped to the glib wordplay of their international release title. The original is grimmer, evoking a hidden menace in a way that is more pictorial. It diverts attention from the indignant political stance of its Sergeant Rasmussen, voiced roughly as, 'Get these mines off my land!', to the hapless predicament of the German boys playing, as it were, on a beach.

David Clare