



CHESTER FILM SOCIETY PRESENTS:

SOPHIE SCHOLL: THE LAST DAYS

2007 GERMANY 115 MINUTES

Directed by Marc Rotemund

Starring Julia Jentsch, Fabian Hinrichs, Joanna Gastdorf

The very qualities we value most in life — decency, morality, heroism — are the hardest to convincingly put on screen. The more idealistic the actions, the less capable most films are of persuading us that flesh-and-blood human beings actually carried them out. Most films, however, do not have the great advantage of “Sophie Scholl — The Final Days.”

The story of Scholl, executed by the German government in 1943 when she was but 21 years old for being a member of that country’s anti-Nazi White Rose student movement, is well known enough to have inspired at least two previous motion pictures. And it is to Scholl that Traudl Junge, the protagonist of “Blind Spot: Hitler’s Secretary,” refers at the close of that moving documentary when she says that if this young woman knew the truth about Hitler, she should have as well.

The current “Sophie Scholl” focuses on the last six days of the character’s life, from the night before her arrest to the moment of her execution. Director Marc Rothemund and screenwriter Fred Breinersdorfer based this film on new interviews with friends and relatives and the never-before-released records of her Gestapo interrogation. That has helped, but it’s nothing compared to the charge “Sophie Scholl” gets from Julia Jentsch in the title role.

“Sophie Scholl” begins with its heroine at her most typically young adult, having fun singing American songs with a friend and sharing confidences about young men. But once the two women part company, Sophie joins her brother Hans (Fabian Hinrichs) and some other members of the White Rose, University of Munich students who are printing and mailing clandestine leaflets calling for resistance against the Nazi regime.

But, convinced that “the campus will ignite,” Hans and Sophie take the even greater chance of personally placing the leaflets around the atrium of a university building. They are caught, and Sophie is handed over to veteran Gestapo interrogator Robert Mohr.

The resulting multilevel psychological duel between captor and captive is the heart of “Sophie Scholl,” and it develops in surprising ways. For at first, unlike the cardboard heroes and heroines of fiction, Scholl declares that she is apolitical and resolutely denies she has anything to do with the leaflets.

Yet even in these early stages, we get glimpses of what makes Jentsch’s performance so strong. Both fear and defiant bravery live simultaneously on Scholl’s face; we can see her strength as well as her terror, her resolve as well as her qualms.

When circumstances make it impossible for her to continue to deny that she and the pamphlets are linked, Scholl makes a strategic but fiercely idealistic retreat. Despite ferocious questioning by Mohr (an excellent performance by Alexander Held), she refuses to name any further names, insisting that she and her brother were the only members of the White Rose.

As the two antagonists spar over questions of ideology, conscience, law and social privilege, it is Mohr rather than Scholl who finds himself overmatched by the strength of will and integrity of his antagonist.

Director Rothemund does a strong job of keeping this film, his third feature, on an even keel. Though the Nazis are sometimes too evil-looking and the film’s Johnny Klimek-Reinhold Heil score is occasionally too emphatic, “Sophie Scholl” by and large does not overdo the emotion.

It is, however, a measure of how much “Sophie Scholl” centers on Jentsch that finally all we can see on screen is her. As befits a film about a woman who took much of her strength from religious conviction, Jentsch’s performance seems to be lit from within. This role has so taken hold of the actress that we feel we’re seeing Scholl’s spirit come to life again. To take a character that idealistic and make us believe she unquestionably existed is acting the way you want it to be.

Kenneth Turan, LA Times

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