

## Don – TMFF Review

War is one of those pervasive elements in human culture that never seems to go away, sometimes it is the small wars waged within countries, pitting their own population against each other and sometimes is the great wars that bring the world together to kill and torture each other for unjustifiable reasons. But no matter the scope or the origin, wars are never good and suffering is always rampant.

Today's script to be reviewed is a war story, but instead of focusing on the "glory" brought to countries by their soldiers, or the great strategists who won the battles, it follows a small group of people who represent all of those who had to endure the pain, loss and desperation brought by the conflicts they never even wanted.

*Don* is a story exploring the fate of a group of Italian soldiers during World War II, a side that rarely gets any screen time, and much less as the "good guys". Good guys in between quotes because, as the script makes a point to show, there are no good guys in a war, not even allies.

The story begins in the home front, in rural Italy where families are barely getting stabilized after WWI, and a new conflict once again tears their homes apart. Under Germany's yoke, young men are initially called into battle, taking away the future of many old families, but as the conflict reached an apex, even older men, war veterans and basically everyone capable of holding a gun got drafted into the war.

The main storyline explores the misfortunes of a group of Italian soldiers, some of which the reader got a chance to get to know in the prelude, as they made the historically daring and horrendously failed advance against Russia, marching on in spite of the lack of proper equipment, clothing or training. The Italians are eventually defeated in a horrible battle around the eponymous river Don, a battle historically known as a turning point for the defeat of the Germans, Hungarians and Italian on the Russian front.

It is here that the story properly begins, as the reader gets to follow the surviving soldiers as they desperately attempt to outrun the advancing Russians as the sweep down killing any survivors, they must also contend with the gelid weather that took on the lives of almost as many soldiers as bullets did, all with the hopes of eventually going back home. But alas none of them was lucky enough; the survivors are eventually captured, rounded up and taken to gulags, kept prisoners until exposure or hunger ended up killing them.

There is a secondary storyline that spans the days before the war, days during and even generations after it. It depicts family members of the protagonist desperately trying to find out about his fate, with government and military officials refusing to release any important information. The protagonist's mother kept her belief that her son was alive

and thus refused to lock her door until the day of her death. A gesture of faith it was; keep the doors open for the son she hoped one day would return. This tradition was kept alive by her grandson, who many decades later, being an octogenarian himself, is given information regarding the capture and death of his father. The man refuses to sue the army for keeping the information a secret and instead embraces the peace of finally knowing. The script ends with a small but meaningful gesture: the old man standing up, and turning the locks on the front door, symbolizing the closure he and his family finally got, and their ability to once and for all let go and move on.

**Don** is an incredibly nuanced piece that can't possibly be entirely summarized even with ten or more pages; it is a complete and long story where every scene counts, whether it be to build the world where the story takes place or to flesh out the characters.

When it comes to the storylines, the main one shows a deeply human side of the world; sure, there is talk about strategies and logistics; but the main focus of the script is on the characters, their fears and apprehension, their hopes and stoicism. This allows the readers to, for example, share their panic as Russian forces assault the camp where they thought they were finally safe or feel sadness as they tell themselves that German forces would soon be there to rescue them and take them home. Not only is that focus on characters effective when it comes to connecting with the reader, in this case it was a completely necessary device, given how the script features a side of the war that is rarely ever considered as good. The author, with his approach, managed to nullify feelings of nationalism and prejudice, getting audiences to focus on the humans suffering, and not on the sides waging war.

Through the eyes of the characters, readers are given a chance to experience the cruelty and disdain that characterize both sides in any war, where moved by feelings of self-righteousness soldiers allow themselves to be as relentless as possible, and yet in a few instances the best qualities of humanity also shine through, be it from Russian countrywomen who fed the soldiers sent to kill their countrymen or the soldiers themselves, capable of putting their own pain aside in order to console the weak and dying. This unbiased representation of the landscape of war makes the script incredibly complex and mature, since the reader isn't spoon fed a side to love and a side to hate as it often happens; here they will obviously root for the protagonists, but there is no clear villain to root against, except for war itself.

The visuals in the story are really impactful: both the establishing shots and backgrounds, but also the gritty and raw depictions of the realities of war. Blood spurts, limbs are lost, sometimes to bayonets and sometimes to the unrelenting cold; and lives are taken, usually in great quantities, and even then it never feels gratuitous. This is not a Tarantino film where fountains of blood erupt to satisfy the sadists in the audience,

this is a story where almost every death matters and has an impact on the main characters, eating at their minds and spirits.

When it comes to character progression it is quite shocking to see them become increasingly numb as time goes by, both physically and mentally, a clear consequence of the emotional exhaustion that made them turn from strong soldiers into hopeless husks.

Finally, the inclusion of a secondary storyline focused on the home front back in Italy, gives the story additional depth as it shows the true extends at which wars are capable of harming people, not only destroying lives far from the battlefield, but also creating wounds that can remain open for decades and transcend generations.

In conclusion, ***Don*** is a great, albeit depressingly tragic, war story daring to represent an often overlooked side of WWII, and managing to connect with the reader through its character driven storyline, impactful visuals and exceptional message.