

Indelible Shadows

Film and the Holocaust

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***Forced March.** U.S.A./Hungary, 1989. D: Rick King. S: Dick Atkins and Charles K. Bardosh. An intriguing drama that approaches the Holocaust from the effective perspective of making a film about the subject. The focus is an American actor, Ben Kline (Chris Sarandon), whose popularity comes from a silly TV series. His Hungarian-Jewish father (Josef Sommer) never talks about the war. Ben agrees to act in a movie in Hungary about the poet Miklos Radnoti. Precisely because - as Ben's costar and eventual lover Mayra (Renee Soutendijk) puts it - "people believe what they're shown; movies become the truth," this film questions its conventions even as it involves us in Radnoti's moving story. Ben has his own demons: for example, his mother died soon after his birth, and he learns that she was not Jewish. As filming progresses, the actor plunges further into Radnoti's psyche, especially because the tough director, Walter (John Seitz), doesn't believe Ben has it in him. He sleeps in the labor camp set rather than at the Hyatt, hardly eats, and recites the poems. The characters articulate what some critics might say, such as the director's line to five men who are not conveying fear: "No matter how close we come, we're not close enough." After Ben's father shows up in Hungary, he claims, "No one can show how it really was," followed by "Who wants to see it?" Ben tries to make Radnoti more of a resister, but the director warns against imposing his emotions on the past. The last part of the film-within-the-film is particularly powerful, and persuasive despite the distancing. Radnoti and the other Jewish labor camp prisoners are ordered to leave the barracks - which are burned - and march back from Yugoslavia to Hungary. We know from the opening that Radnoti did not survive, so the question is not if he will die, but how, Ben finally has his character die meekly, exhausted. The closing scene of the actor floating in his swimming pool, back in Beverly Hills, shows a changed man, now isolated, *Forced March* literalizes what films like *The Pawnbroker* and *Sophie's Choice* suggest; the Holocaust is most authentically depicted when it's bracketed, or separated from the present-tense narrative of characters trying to come to terms with the past.