

WVXU Views and Reviews

Movie Reviews

Nanking

THINKFilm

Rated R

Now Showing at: Cincinnati World Cinema on March 25th and 26th.

Review by: Larry Thomas



There are documentaries and there are docudramas. On occasion, the two filmmaking forms cross paths. In *Nanking*, the documentary about the Japanese attack on and devastation of the then capital of China, we also get an element of docudrama.

The heart of the film is, of course, the interviews with survivors along with archival and newsreel footage, and some home movies taken by locals. In addition to this assemblage of history on film, Oscar winners Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman, who co-wrote and co-directed, have assembled a good cast of familiar players to speak the words of the people they represent. Their dialogue is taken from letters and journal entries. They represent a cross section of Chinese survivors and Western residents who were caught in the middle of one of the most vicious acts in history. The actors include Rosalind Chao, Stephen Dorff, John Getz, Woody Harrelson, Mariel Hemingway, Chris Mulkey and Jurgen Prochnow.

Although the story of "The Rape of Nanking," as it is known, has been told before, most documentaries have concentrated on the atrocities of World War II in Europe. In August 1937 the Japanese government was allied with the Nazi forces in Europe and planned to take over much of Asia while Hitler invaded Europe. First they bombed Shanghai, as an introduction to their intentions. After securing Shanghai, they began the assault on the capitol city of Nanking on December 9. In the six weeks that followed, it's estimated that more than 300,000 Chinese were killed, and 20,000 or more women were raped. Not only was it a prelude to the Holocaust in Europe, but also to this day there are politicians who claim it never happened, that the whole thing is a fabrication.

Given the subject matter, some of the scenes are particularly horrifying and graphic, as are some of the descriptions of the events. Much of the footage shot in Nanking was smuggled out with the help of westerners who lived there, and who also aided in setting up a "Safe Zone," which resulted in the saving of as many as 200,000 refugees during the assault.

Nanking is a stirring documentary if for no other reason that it illuminates the evils one group of people is willing to perpetrate on another. It's long been said that those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it. That's good enough reason why films like *Nanking* should be required viewing.