



Saving Private Ryan

Hollywood faced the Holocaust in *Schindler's List*, and John Williams wrote the score.

After his latest Spielberg collaboration, the composer tells Nick Shave about the challenge of setting the horror of the Second World War to music

Imagine the soft thud of falling missiles, the warm stench of death and battlefields strewn with shattered bodies. Over 50 years since the end of the Second World War, the gore and horror of the conflict is returning in a spate of movies giving us a Hollywood's-eye-view of the 'last good war'. First off the troopship are the collaborating film veterans Steven Spielberg and John Williams, whose \$70 million film, *Saving Private Ryan*, is released in Britain this month.

Of *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg says he has aimed to "discover what it's really like to be in combat". In horrifyingly graphic detail, it tells the story of D-Day squadron leader John Miller (Tom Hanks) who lands with seven comrades on Omaha Beach, Normandy, in June 1944, and slips behind German lines to rescue a stranded paratrooper, Private James Ryan (Matt Damon). Hollywood insiders are tipping the director's raw depiction of men under fire as one of Spielberg's most hard-hitting films to date.

Other forthcoming war films include Jonathan Mostow's *U-571*, in which US troops attempt to raid a German submarine; Terrence Malick's star-studded *The Thin Red Line* – adapted from James Jones's sequel novel to *From Here to Eternity*; Ethan and Joel Coen's *To the White Sea* – adapted from James Dickey's novel about a US pilot stranded in Japan; and an as-yet untitled film about Second World War POW Lou Zamperini, starring Nicolas Cage.

With such an onslaught of combat films you might expect a barrage of Samuel Barber-style *Adagios* – so effective in *Platoon* – to tug at the heart strings. But Williams and Spielberg turned away from the current vogue for wall-to-wall sound, with a score that takes a back seat to the action. Says Williams: "*Private Ryan* is a film that

is so super-realistic that it's better in the action scenes actually not to have music – better in the sense of achieving and holding this sense of realism which gives the film its great power."

Williams's orchestral score, both haunting and grandiose, is an emotive force in the film, and flows in long stretches to accompany the ongoing journey of Miller and his squad behind enemy lines. Much of the realism in the action scenes, therefore, lies in the hands of cinematographer Janusz Kaminski, who won an Oscar for his previous work on Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. In both films, hand-held camerawork heightens the drama throughout many of the harrowing scenes. Explains Spielberg: "For *Private Ryan*, I wanted to bring myself to the experience with the fresh eye of a combat cameraman, not someone who has preconceived notions of what combat was like. I think it's helped the authenticity a lot."

The film is Spielberg's fourth stab at the theme of war. And Williams, his long-time collaborator, is no stranger to the demands of the director, having written scores to Spielberg's *1941* (1979), *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Empire of the Sun* (1987). "Long before I wrote anything," he reveals, "Spielberg and I talked about where the music would appear and the character of the film. And we agreed upon the dynamics and tempi in those scenes depicting aspects of sacrifice and suffering."

For Williams, *Saving Private Ryan* was a reminder of *Schindler's List* – a film which told the story of how an entrepreneurial Nazi, Oskar Schindler, put his neck on the line by buying Jews as slave labour and thereby saved them from the death camps. "Working on *Schindler's List* was not only harrowing but daunting in the

challenge it provided," Williams says, "because these subjects are almost sacrosanct. There was nothing we could do to match the quality of the sacrifices of the people who actually lived through these years."

But such comments invite the question, does the Second World War really sit comfortably with a king-size Coke and a carton of popcorn? In short, what's the value of turning the mayhem into a spectacle? "You're helping to recall parts of human experience – not the nicest, but the compelling parts of our human history," says Williams. "It could have a very positive, palliative effect, because younger people can get in touch with a history that has been forgotten."

There is another reason for the flood of Second World War films: the politics involved in getting projects onto the big screen. In America, the Cold War is passé, Vietnam is too divisive, and the First World War too distant. While there are other conflicts for the studios to plunder – Korea, Grenada, or even television's very own Gulf War (no shortage of footage there) – the Second World War presents film-makers with the ultimate in human drama. "There's nothing more dramatic than love or war," says Spielberg.

But, as Williams and Spielberg have found, dramatising a war that is still within living memory brings responsibility. As Williams puts it: "I can only hope and pray that we've done justice to the experiences that the survivors remember having lived through." In Hollywood, it seems, anything is possible. ■

• *'Saving Private Ryan'* opens at cinemas around the country on 11 September. The soundtrack is on Dreamworks Records (DRMD-50046).