

The Water Diviner Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill



The Water Diviner. Produced by Troy Lum, Andrew Mason and Keith Rodger. Directed by Russell Crowe. Screenplay by Andrew Anastasios and Andrew Knight. Based on the book by Sarah McGuire. Photography by Andrew Lesnie. Music by David Hirshfelder.

Length: 111 minutes. A Hopscotch Feature. Warner Brothers/Universal distribution. Cinematic Release December 2014. Rated R for violence

Rating ***** 90% Available on DVD. All images taken from the public domain using Google's requirements.

CAST

Joshua Connor: Russell Crowe *Ayshe*: Olga Kurylenko *Major Hasan*: Yilmaz Erdoğan *Sergeant Jemal*: Cem Yilmaz *Orhan*: Dylan Georgiades *Lieutenant Colonel Cyril Hughes*: Jai Courtney *Eliza Connor*: Jaqueline McKenzie *Arthur*

Connor: Ryan Corr *Henry Connor*: Ben O'Toole *Edward Connor*: James Fraser
Fatma: Megan Gale *Captain James Brindley*: Daniel Wylie *Father Macintyre*:
 Damon Herriman *Omer*: Steve Bastoni

From the first scenes this emerges as a welcomingly different film. Lines of tired, pensive Turkish soldiers, clothed in motley, ragged uniforms, prepare to charge the enemy trenches. The stereotypical images of Middle Eastern soldiers, all glinting eyes as they cheerfully leap forward to kill, does not exist here: they are just weary and fearful men defending their homeland. When they do charge the trenches they are at first puzzled as the trenches are empty: then to their initial credulity they see the Allied ships sailing off. As they run up the rise the images of dirty, muddy trenches give way to a bright blue sea under a cloudless sky. Laughter and cheers replace their sadness. After living in a state of extraordinary tension and miserable expectations of death and more suffering, they find that life can also give exuberant joy. That idea emerges again in the film's conclusion.

After those scenes the next, set four years later, is as far away from Gallipoli as anyone can get – the Mallee country of Northwest Victoria. Here the process reverses. Joshua Connor, a farmer and water diviner, goes into a jubilant state when he finds water on his land, but returns home to being depressed as his wife can only be happy when she sinks into a fantasy that their three sons are still alive. All three were killed in one day at Gallipoli. There cannot be any peace on the Connor's farm. After his wife drowns herself, he determines to keep his promise to her and see that they get a proper burial, so he journeys to Gallipoli.

He finds that an absence of war is far from being the same thing as peace, for as a supercilious and cynical British officer explains to him, the defeated Ottoman Empire is being carved up by the victors, England, France and Greece. He also explains to Connor that resentful Turks are causing problems. For some reason they do not like that process or the occupying English army in Istanbul. Connor soon shares that dislike as the officious English try to stop him visiting Gallipoli where their War Graves Commission work to identify and rebury the dead. That is part of bringing order to war's chaos. Both Turkish and British soldiers now work together to tidy up the battlefield they once ferociously fought over. Initially seen as a pest by the soldiers there, both Allied and Turkish come to respect Connor and help him with his task.

He soon finds himself embroiled in four different problems at once; his personal battle with English officialdom worsens, as does the worsening political situation. Then the attraction between himself and his hotel owner Ayshe, under familial and religious compulsion to marry someone else, leads him and her into tensions with her relatives. Finally he finds that just burying his sons is not enough: he must resolve the mystery of what did happen to them.

The Water Diviner is a well crafted film with locales and sets that make for an intelligent use of epic and a fine sense of era. Andrew Lesnie's photography is extraordinarily effective, often beautiful, at times even sensual, giving a strong sense of sun drenched lands. Like many other very experienced stars making their directorial debut, Crowe has a strong sense of narrative and knows how to use his cast. He also knows how to avoid stereotypes. The British officers are not hearty stupid types, but cranky tired men wanting to be home. The Turks are not ferocious warriors, but generous, courteous and courageous. Aysha is no subservient widow, but fights for her rights.



This photographic still gives an accurate idea of the high quality of the film's photography

The story is well told and Crowe wisely goes for an underused era and locale. The only other major English language films to cover the same territory

that comes to mind are Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* (1981) and the 1970 Tony Curtis-Charles Bronson adventure *You Can't Win 'em All*. That film was set in 1922 towards the end of the Greek-Turkish war. Only in the last quarter when Connor goes eastwards by train into the war zone does Crowe's movie begin to resemble the earlier action movie as the war between Greece and Turkey finally breaks out. A similar idea to that which is the focus of *The Water Diviner* was used in the 1982 Costa-Gavras film *Missing*. Ed Horman, an American, arrives in Chile searching for his missing son, but Chile is turbulent after the 1973 coup, and like Connor he soon finds that a repressive military government combines with the officials he expects help from to thwart his attempts. Both Connor and Horman are courteous, patient and restrained and possess a fundamental decency. With both men these characteristics conceal a quiet but relentless determination to find their sons.



The Water Diviner differs from both *Gallipoli* and *Missing* however in its view of humanity. Peter Weir's film shows good men being devoured by war and as being helpless to stop that process. In Costa-Gavras's film we are shown how low humans can go with the establishment of a fascist dictatorship which only a few decent people unsuccessfully battle. In *The Water Diviner* Connor wins against the effects of war.

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