



SPARE & DEVASTATING

Rosie Fiore mines the movie everyone's talking about

Dunkirk ★★★★★

Three soldiers, their faces unbearably young and exhausted, sit side by side on a beach. They watch a man in full uniform walk towards the water. He sheds his helmet and kit and keeps walking, until the waves swallow him and he disappears. The young soldiers do not speak.

At 107 minutes, *Dunkirk* is one of director Christopher Nolan's shortest films. The dialogue is spare – Fionn Whitehead's Tommy, arguably the film's central character, doesn't speak more than a handful of lines.

With consummate care, Nolan lets the pictures tell the tale – we live on the beach in Dunkirk, France, with these desperate men. We fly in the cockpit of a spitfire as a German plane moves above us. We feel the panic as a ship's hull fills with water.

The explosions will rattle your bones and shake your seat, but it is the humanity of the story that will grip you.



Royal Air Force Spitfires in 'Dunkirk' Picture: © 2017 Warner Bros. Ent. All Rights Reserved.

Fans of Nolan's work (*Memento*, *Inception*, *Interstellar*), know he is no stranger to time-bending, and in *Dunkirk* he daringly tells a three-tiered story. The events on the beach and Mole breakwater unfold over a week. The *Moonstone*, a 40ft yacht, forms the basis for the sea sequence, over the course of a day. And

the air sequence, in which two Spitfire pilots (Tom Hardy and Jack Lowden) do their best to protect the ships below, takes place in an hour.

These three intense stories are tightly interwoven, and we are drawn into the lives of the men, who all seem heartbreakingly young. There's a brutal honesty about the film –

there are some acts of generosity and heroism, but just as many acts of cowardice, selfishness and brutality. We are made to consider how we might behave in those appalling circumstances. Would we reach out a hand, or push the other person away?

The performances are all magnificent – Whitehead's tense, bony, young face is mesmerising. You will be won over by Mark Rylance's gentle boat captain, and feel heartbroken for Cillian Murphy's desperate, shell-shocked "Shivering Soldier" (he is never given a name). Kenneth Branagh gets to stand on the Mole in a greatcoat and speak noble, meaningful lines, which he does very well, but as roles go it's the short straw.

This is a magnificently crafted film, I would argue Nolan's finest yet, an exercise in minimalism and powerful visual language. But most of all, it shows us the best of humanity.

"I think," Murphy said, "that when we speak of the spirit of Dunkirk, what we mean is empathy." And we need a little more of that in the world. **👏**

'Dunkirk' is in cinemas on Friday



The director's take

Christopher Nolan tells Rosie Fiore about the Dunkirk spirit

Dunkirk is a story of surrender, but it is also the story of a lucky escape and an army that lives to fight another day. Nevertheless, there isn't a single German in Dunkirk. Why?

"I wanted to be true to the experience of the people who were there. They were not

face-to-face with the enemy. They were on the beach, with barrages of mortar fire and incoming planes.

"We screened *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg's own print, for the cast and crew. It was very powerful and horrifying. It told us a couple of things. Firstly, don't compete, it's too good. And secondly, that this wasn't the tension we were after. We decided to use the language of suspense, more Hitchcock and Henri-Georges Clouzot (particularly *Wages of Fear*), than horror or war films. We wanted to explore the suspense derived through physical paralysis – can you get that stretcher across the plank?"

Nolan always uses film – Dunkirk was shot on an IMAX camera and is being shown in 70mm and IMAX format.

"Film as a medium – celluloid film – has an organic quality to it, whereby the individual vision of different filmmakers has always tended to be very distinctive. This is simply by virtue of the medium. Even if you're all using the same film stock, there are so many factors around exposure, light, different batches of film – it meant that in the past, movies were more 'different'. That's why we are so committed to celluloid film. It's not about

spectacle, per se, it's about a diversity of imagery, a way of giving people something they can be immersed in.

How did he feel about bringing this long-awaited project to an audience?

"I think when people heard I was doing this film, there was an assumption that it would be a three-hour film with a lot of talking. We wanted to go for something very different. The script was 76 pages – half the length of my usual scripts.

"In stripping it down, I wanted to give space for the images that I knew needed to play a little longer. But also I didn't want to over-sentimentalise it. I didn't want characters you cared about because they explained to you why you should care about them. I just wanted to just hook into the physics of their situation. And that is very intense. You can only sustain that for so long. For British people particularly, the story of Dunkirk is freighted with emotion. I wanted to play against that and let the emotion creep up on you.

"I have a fascination with time. The mechanism of how cinema manipulates a sense of time for an audience is unique to the medium. With any film you see, its

manipulation of time is very sophisticated, but that machinery is hidden. So on the same screen, we can see a film which unfolds over a day, or a film which unfolds over millennia and we're completely fine with that.

"What I try to do is use it more aggressively as a tool and bring it to the audience's attention. I want you to realise that the film is manipulating your sense of time and that it can be an expressive part of how you feel." **Of the actors in Dunkirk, only those who had grown up in England already knew the story. How did Nolan sell it to the studio?**

"The story rhythms are universal, and they're imbedded in Hollywood culture. The studio didn't know the story, but we were able to point to films, like Sam Raimi's first *Spider-Man*, or *Independence Day*, which have their 'Dunkirk moment'. They just don't always know where it comes from.

"It's a very Hollywood sentiment, when a community comes together to secure victory from the jaws of defeat. It's very hopeful and a positive view of human nature. If people don't know the story, they might not sit down with that heightened sense of expectation and emotion, but hopefully as the picture unfolds, they will arrive at that." **👏**