

Fugitive Pieces

Written & Directed by Jeremy Podeswa

Based on the novel *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels

Principal Actors: Stephen Dillane + Robbie Kay & Rade Serbedzija



Greek archeologist rescues a Jewish child from the Nazis and gives him a new life in Canada after the war, but the boy mourns his birth family, and grows into a melancholy man (Dillane) who has difficulty forming attachments. Terrific cast extracts the very best from a much-loved source novel.

NOTE: Evocative cinematography warrants a special trip to see film on the big screen if at all possible.

Tzivi's Stars:



Metro Chicago Release?

**Opens June 13, 2008 at Pipers Alley Theatre in Old Town
& Landmark Renaissance Place Theatre in Highland Park**

Here's a dilemma: seeing as many Holocaust films as I've seen in my role as a Jewish film critic, I've become pretty jaded. I worry when Holocaust stories are used to generate cheap sentiment, and whenever that happens, I'm infuriated. So I'm probably harder on Holocaust films than most of you are, because I've already seen way more than my share. For example, I thought two recent films, *The Counterfeiters* and *Fateless*, were good enough but critically overrated. What a surprise, then, to fall hook, line, and sinker for the new film *Fugitive Pieces*.

Fugitive Pieces is the story of a Polish boy named "Jakob" who manages to escape into the woods when the Nazis round up his family. Found, rescued, and eventually given a new life in Canada, Jakob grows into a melancholy adult, haunted by memories and

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afraid of attachments. His marriage is a disaster; the more his beautiful, vivacious wife “Alex” tries to animate him, the more sullen he becomes. He reacts to her love-filled eyes as if they were police interrogation lights.

The whole cast is terrific, speaking in multiple languages across great leaps of space and time. Robbie Kay plays Jakob as a boy in all the European scenes, and Serbian actor Rade Serbedzija plays Jakob’s lifeline, a Greek archeologist named “Athos.” Once in Toronto, Jakob grows into an adult played by British actor Stephen Dillane. The two women in Jakob’s adult life are played by Rosamund Pike (also a Brit) as wife “Alex,” and Israeli actress Ayelet Zurer as “Michaela,” the woman who draws Jakob back from his lonely abyss. Finally, Ed Stoppard plays Jakob’s neighbor “Ben,” the son of Yiddish-speaking Holocaust survivors. Ben’s parents are older than Jakob, and although their wartime traumas are clearly darker than his, writer/director Jeremy Podeswa trusts us to fill in the blanks.

I haven’t read the Anne Michaels novel which provided Podeswa with his source material for this film, so you’ll have to look elsewhere for a compare and contrast. All I can tell you is that I was completely enraptured. I believed in every character, in the minor roles as well as the major ones. I didn’t want to leave the theatre when the film was over: I wanted to know more about these people, and I wanted to protect them from whatever fate had in store for them after the credits rolled.

One caveat: *Fugitive Pieces* is basically about two academic types (Jakob and Athos) who are tongue-tied in face-to-face conversation, and communicate best as solitary writers. But each new location in which they find themselves gives the story visual weight, and the cinematography tells a parallel story about the search for “home.” So see *Fugitive Pieces* on the big screen if you can; if you wait for DVD, you’ll be left with a plot stripped of much of its sensory potency.

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Jakob with Athos (Photo Credit: N. Nikolopoulos)



Jakob with Michaela (Photo Credit: Alex Dukay)

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SPOILER ALERT: From Page to Screen

Although I cover all Jewish culture topics in my monthly *JUF News* column “Tzivi’s Spotlight,” I think of myself primarily as a film critic. Therefore, when I know (or guess) that a filmmaker is interested in adapting a specific novel for the screen, I make a personal vow **NOT** to read the book until I’ve seen the film. The simple truth is that even an unsuccessful film typically has an audience that is larger – often by many magnitudes – than the readership of a best-selling book. So I want to judge the material as most of my readers will: film first.

But after I’ve seen a film, I often read the source material, especially if I either love the film (recent examples include *Beaufort* and *The Namesake*), or I feel in my gut that the adaptation is a bad one (recent examples include *Atonement* and *There Will Be Blood*).

I definitely do **NOT** believe that the source book is **ALWAYS** better than the film. I can name several films which are actually better than their source books. Two of my favorite examples are *The Cider House Rules* and *The Human Stain*. In other cases, the film and the source run parallel, so that each one actually enhances the other. *Beaufort* and *The Namesake* are both good examples of this.

I know many people love Anne Michaels’ novel *Fugitive Pieces*, and maybe if I had read it before I saw the film, I would like it better too, but in this case I really believe the screenplay is far superior to the novel. The novel has two very distinct points-of-views. The main story is Jakob’s story (which takes up approximately 2/3rds of the pages), but in the last 1/3rd, the POV abruptly shifts to Ben. **If you have not seen the film yet, then please DO NOT read any further, but if you have seen the film, then please read on.**

Anne Michaels’ novel *Fugitive Pieces* begins with the death of Jakob and Michaela. They’ve left the island, they’re on their way back to Canada, and they both die as the result of a traffic accident in Athens. Ben, who barely knew Jakob in life, travels to Greece to wrap up his affairs. Frankly, I found these plot elements pretty heavy-handed and contrived, and I’m betting Jeremy Podeswa did too.

Podeswa’s screenplay creates a much more intimate relationship between these two men. Ben’s parents, who have marginal roles in the novel, become Jakob’s surrogate parents in the film. Podeswa adds several lovely scenes for “Sarah” (Ben’s mother), which mirror new scenes he’s added for “Mrs. Serenou” (a very minor character in the novel). The two perfectly-cast actresses (Sarah Orenstein speaking Yiddish and Themis Bazaka speaking Greek) add a maternal glow, making Jakob’s gradual emotional thaw in Michaela’s arms much more believable.

Futhermore, depicting Ben as Jakob’s surrogate baby brother also allows Podeswa to play out some father/son issues in the film that Michaels ignores in the novel. Ben’s father “Jozef” (Diego Matamoros) has been deeply traumatized by his Holocaust

experiences. In the film, Jakob watches Jozef’s emotional disintegration with helpless empathy (empathy for both Jozef and for Ben), but also with growing resolve: “there but for the grace of God go I.”

Since the multifaceted relationship between Jakob and Ben now ripples through-out the whole screenplay, Podeswa has no need to kill Jakob off in order to join their two stories together. So what if that means Jakob and Michaela get to live “happily ever after” in the film? Part of the point of *Fugitive Pieces* is that we must all grasp for what happiness we can in life. No one ever knows what will happen tomorrow!

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Tzivi’s Stars

NOVEL FILM

☆☆☆1/2

☆☆☆☆1/2



Tziviah bat Yisroel v’Hudah (Jan Lisa Huttner) is the managing editor of *FILMS FOR TWO*®: *The Online Guide for Busy Couples* (www.films42.com), a website devoted to promoting films of interest to both male and female audience members. Jan writes a regular monthly column called “Tzivi’s Spotlight” for Chicago’s *JUF News*. Her award-winning articles have also appeared in *All About Jewish Theatre*, the *Connecticut Jewish Ledger*, the *Forward*, *Jewish Film World*, and the *World Jewish Digest* in addition to numerous other non-Jewish publications and websites.

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