

# Mighty heart, weak drama

By [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue



In the wake of 9/11, Daniel Pearl, Southeast Asia bureau chief for the *Wall Street Journal*, was in Pakistan chasing down leads to a mysterious figure named Sheikh Mubarak Ali Gilani, who he believed had connections to Osama bin Laden and to the recently captured “shoe bomber,” Richard Reid. Omar, a Muslim extremist, lured Pearl into a phony interview with Gilani, then abducted him in an effort to embarrass Pakistan’s president Pervez Musharraf with a high-profile international incident. Pearl was the perfect target for a Muslim terrorist: an American journalist in an important position at an internationally known magazine, and also a Jew.

Both the memoir by Pearl’s wife, Mariane, written with Sarah Crichton (*A Mighty Heart: The Inside Story of the Al Qaeda Kidnapping of Danny Pearl*), and last year’s HBO documentary *The Journalist and the Jihadi* are far more compelling than Michael Winterbottom’s film, also called *A Mighty Heart*. The book sticks to Mariane’s point of view, and *The Journalist and the Jihadi* juxtaposes Daniel’s story with that of Omar, a British national whose intellectual gifts and education paralleled Daniel’s but who dropped out of the London School of Economics to immerse himself in the Muslim underground.

John Orloff’s screenplay for *A Mighty Heart* keeps the memoir’s focus on Mariane (played by Angelina Jolie) but not consistently. It also follows Pakistani and U.S. investigators as they get closer to Omar (Aly Khan), yet Winterbottom’s heart doesn’t seem to be in these action sequences, which are underlit and difficult to

follow. The film seems more comfortable whenever it can return to Mariane, but when rumors are flying that Daniel's body has been discovered, the film doesn't show her reaction to the news.

A few of the actors in supporting roles are good, and cinematographer Marcel Zyskind lights the nighttime scenes to make Karachi appear simultaneously seductive and ominous. But the film is barely adequate as a political thriller. Characters and locations named in the investigation go by in a whirl; even Omar makes almost no impression. And the movie is not very interesting as a psychological portrait of Mariane either. Mostly it enshrines her courage and her refusal to fall apart in the face of terror and her grief.

It's impossible not to admire Mariane Pearl, but admiration is a poor starting point for drama. Jolie wears her hair in frizzy black tendrils and she stays firmly in character, but she doesn't have much of a part. Her entire performance builds to the moment when she learns that Daniel (Dan Futterman) is dead, and her held-in emotions burst forth behind closed doors. It's a perfectly convincing breakdown, and you can't help being touched by it, but there isn't enough of a character to provide a context for this display of feeling.

Winterbottom's docudrama approach worked brilliantly in the picture that first brought attention to his work, the deeply moving *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997). But here, as in his recent political films *In This World* and *The Road to Guantánamo*, the documentary approach has a distancing effect. Perhaps because of his unwillingness to cheapen Mariane Pearl's story, Winterbottom didn't want us to get wrapped up in the action. But that decision didn't lead to a dramatic film.