

Bosnia on the cheap

by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [April 10, 2002](#) issue

When photojournalist Harrison Lloyd (David Strathairn) disappears in Vukovar in the early days of the war in Bosnia, his wife, Sarah (Andie MacDowell), refuses to believe he's been killed. Insisting that she would know in her heart if he were dead--that "something inside me would have broken"--she sets out for Yugoslavia to find him.

The premise of *Harrison's Flowers* suggests a cross between a political thriller like Constantin Costa-Gavras's *Missing* and a pop romantic fantasy like the recent *Dragonfly*, in which a couple whose love burns with a pure flame can communicate across unimaginable distances. But the two genres don't mix, and the implausibility of Sarah's mission undermines the brutal realism that director Elie Chouraqui otherwise seeks to achieve.

MacDowell's character is nonsensical. She takes off for Yugoslavia apparently without any notion of what horrors she might encounter there. Considering that she's married to a *Newsweek* photographer whose war coverage won him the Pulitzer and that she too works at the newsmagazine, you'd think she might have acquired a little secondhand savvy about life in a war-torn nation. But it isn't until she lands in the middle of the fighting and is beaten and nearly raped by Serbian soldiers that reality dawns.

At that point she hooks up with a pair of Western journalists (Adrien Brody and Brendan Gleeson) and evidently overnight becomes as canny and hard-bitten as they are. It's as though the movie, having lost its prize-winning photojournalist as a chronicler of the Bosnian war, simply plugged Sarah into his role. MacDowell's performance amounts to a series of histrionic outbursts followed by photogenic displays of courage. It's hardly her fault.

Harrison's Flowers is so badly done--the dialogue shifts back and forth between thematic pronouncements and exchanges so banal the actors might have made them up on the set--that you might be tempted to laugh it off. You can't, though, because its depiction of Bosnia is disturbingly graphic. No doubt Chouraqui and the other screenwriters (there are four in all, adapting a novel by one of them, Isabel

Ellsen) are guilty more of incompetence than of opportunism, but the result is the same. Imposing scenes of the violence of this particular war on such a preposterous narrative doesn't only cheapen the subject matter; it evokes moral queasiness.

So does Chouraqui's staging of the atrocities. In one scene, Sarah and her cohorts come across a bus whose passengers have all been murdered, their bodies scattered at the side of the road. It's obvious that one of them, a teenage girl whom we met briefly in a previous scene, was raped. There's a trick to filming a shock effect of this kind so that it doesn't look staged, but Chouraqui doesn't have it. The images are painfully self-conscious, with a lurid decorativeness that's rather sickening. There's more of the same when Sarah and the others make it into Vukovar.

The movie mentions Milosevic and ethnic cleansing, but its position is the familiar one: war is madness. No attempt is made to discriminate between the two sides, even though the violence we're shown was distinctive to the Serbians.

The political coyness of *Harrison's Flowers* is craven, especially in contrast to the superb Bosnian picture *No Man's Land*, which recently won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. *No Man's Land* doesn't choose sides either, but it's a vastly different sort of movie--a Beckettian vaudeville in which the two main characters, a Bosnian and a Serb deadlocked in a trench between the two front lines, are meant to represent something more than their respective armies, and where the ineptitude of the UN peacekeeping forces is as much of a satirical target as the absurdities of war. There's very little violence in *No Man's Land*, and we see the faces of the people who perpetrate it. A filmmaker with a moral compass and an idea in his head doesn't work up an audience with images of mass rape and slaughter and then chalk it all up to widespread insanity.

Chouraqui's real allegiance is to the courage of war correspondents like Harrison Lloyd and the selfless love of faithful wives like Sarah. Other movies (*Under Fire*, *Beyond Rangoon*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Salvador*) have managed to portray compelling personal stories set against a vivid and believable backdrop of political upheaval. But in *Harrison's Flowers* the personal story is a fake, and the political backdrop is rigged.