



Julia Jentsch in *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*

## MATTERS OF CONSCIENCE

### *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*

reviews by M. Faust

The name “Sophie Scholl” probably meant nothing to a lot of you, as it did to me, when it was read in the title of this German film as one of the five nominees for Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars last month. The people of Germany, though, know the name well. Sophie Scholl was a university student who, in 1943, was a member of an anti-Nazi resistance movement called the “White Rose.” The group felt that the German public was being deceived about the progress of the war, which they realized was unwinnable. They hoped via pamphlets containing suppressed information about Germany’s losses and defeats, especially those at Stalingrad, to provoke a student uprising that would spread through the country, forcing Hitler’s regime to sue for peace.

Sophie and her brother Hans were captured, perhaps due to their own carelessness, tried for “high treason, troop demoralization and aiding the enemy” and executed. Four of their comrades met the same fate; others were arrested and imprisoned. It’s not hard to see why in Germany, in a country that has spent decades questioning its collective conscience for complicity in the actions of Hitler’s government, Sophie and the others have attained the status of secular saints.

*Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* is not a history of the war or of the White Rose and its activities. As its title indicates, it begins just before Sophie and Hans’ arrest and ends with their execution. It is based on court transcripts of her interrogation and trial that were discovered in East Germany in 1990, casting new light on the proceedings.

This premise may remind you of both Carl Dreyer and Robert Bresson’s films about Joan of Arc, both also based on court transcripts. Each of these films (I was also reminded of Alain Cavalier’s transcendent *Thérèse*) is about a young woman who is firm and unyielding in her beliefs. In every way an ordinary girl, Sophie (compellingly portrayed by Julia

Jentsch) certainly doesn’t want to die: She takes joy from life, from dancing and music, from her upcoming marriage to a young man who is serving on the Eastern front.

But she is blessed with purity of belief. She has heard of the government’s eugenics programs, of its treatment of Jews and the rumors of extermination camps. And nothing her prosecutor does to shake her beliefs, to shame her, even to get her to feign forgiveness to save her life, moves her. Just the opposite: If she was ever troubled by doubts, she goes to her death secure in the knowledge of a good cause. (Her executioner reported that he never saw a prisoner approach death with so erect a carriage.)

There were times while watching *Sophie Scholl* when I questioned its purpose. Did the world need another film to tell us how nasty the Nazis were, especially one whose ending was a foregone conclusion? (Even if you’ve never heard of the White Rose, I’ve given away nothing by telling you that it ends with Sophie’s execution: The film’s title does that.) Why not tell the film from the point of view of brother Hans, whose story seems to have more dramatic content—he fought on the Eastern front and saw the slaughters he wants to expose; he is studying to be a doctor.

But in the end this isn’t really a film about World War II. The trappings of the era are minimized, no more swastikas and “Heil Hitler!”s than necessary to maintain the setting. Director Marc Rothemund wanted to address issues and ask questions that will always be relevant to our lives: How aware are we of right and wrong in our lives? What could we, would we do to prevent injustice? Is there anything for which we would lay down our lives? In an era when it’s all too easy to distance ourselves from the evils of the world, seemingly so mundane and unavoidable, these are questions worth asking, even as we hope never to confront them as Sophie does.



Presley Chweneyagae in *Tsotsi*

## ONE THUG AND A BABY

### *Tsotsi*

reviews by M. Faust

This year’s Oscar winner for Best Foreign Language Film, and probably the first film to be shot in the language of Tsotsi-Taal, *Tsotsi* is a story from a place that must certainly be teeming with them—the endless shantytowns that surround the city of Johannesburg, South Africa, with a collective population of 10 million people.

Based on a novel written in 1960 by playwright Athol Fugard, the story was updated to the present day in order to avoid the budgetary problem of having to recreate the costumes and locations of 50 years ago. The change barely matters, though, because the possibilities of the setting, rich in either time period, are reduced to background for a vivid but conventional morality tale.

The title means “thug,” and is the only name by which the film’s 19-year-old protagonist (played by Presley Chweneyagae) is known. He is the leader-by-default of a gang of four that spends its nights terrorizing the outskirts of the city. Though they rob and beat at will, a subway crime we witness is the first time they have committed murder. Crossing that line bothers one of the gang’s members, but his attempt to appeal to the decency of Tsotsi only gets him a ferocious beating.

We learn that Tsotsi has a bad past, one he chooses to repress. His outburst of temper comes from a remark that pierced that shell, one that causes him to head out looking for more mayhem. What he finds instead, at the end of a night of violence, is—a baby.

How Tsotsi acquires the infant is not believable, but that’s what the story is going to be about and therefore it is engineered. Nor is it plausible that he holds onto it, unless we read a great deal into his mind, more than we really have any basis for. The important thing is for us to recognize that no one who will care for a helpless infant can be truly bad.

That’s a banal statement, and at heart *Tsotsi* is a fairly banal movie. It is strongest in its depiction of the shantytown life—the impossibly cramped shacks built literally on top of each other, the orange

haze that passes for air, the propulsive kwaito music, the seedy illegal bars that offer nothing aside from alcohol. We may be accused of gawking at the misery of other people, but seeing how people in such places live is an important function of movies: how else would we know?

Tsotsi’s humanization increases as he comes to know a local woman, a little older than himself, who is raising a baby of her own. (It’s possible that her husband was killed by Tsotsi and his droogs.) Though he approaches her for help in feeding the baby the only way he knows how—at gunpoint—he sees both tenderness and beauty in her life, and begins to sense that his own life might be lived in a different way.

But of course real life is hard, and this film that wants us to go gooey at the sight of a gurgling baby is also more than happy to rub our noses in pain. A flashback to Tsotsi’s childhood almost caused me to walk out of the theater. (The scene involves a dog, and I’m sure that the filmmakers did not mistreat or hurt it, but if you have any affection for animals you may want to step out of the theater for a minute or two when Tsotsi’s memories kick in. The event is even foreshadowed by some earlier dialogue.)

Director Gavin Hood, who previously directed a dreary Polish film, *In Desert and Wilderness*, that played in Buffalo a few years ago, wanted to soften Fugard’s ending to leave the film with a feeling of hope. I’m mystified as to how he feels his ending accomplishes this. Without giving anything away, let me say that Tsotsi’s fate after the final shot of the film is both inevitable and painful to contemplate, given that we’ve grown to sympathize with the boy. (Never truly convincing as a hardened thug, baby-faced actor Chweneyagae seems to have more in common with his crawling companion than his co-criminals.) If a movie is going to make me feel bad, it would be nice if it at least had a point to it.