

'Music Box' raises tough issues, but lacks suspense

NEW YORK (CNS) — Director Costa-Gavras misses the mark with his new thriller "Music Box" (Tri-Star), an unsettling and ultimately badly focused film about one woman's fight to defend her father against accusations that he committed unspeakable war crimes.

Hungarian immigrant Mike Laszlo (Armin Mueller-Stahl) is a retired steel worker and loving family man. A longtime widower, Laszlo raised his daughter, Ann (Jessica Lange), and his son, Karchy (Michael Rooker), on his own in a working-class Chicago neighborhood.

Both adore their father and have made him proud — Ann as a successful attorney and Karchy as a veteran of the Vietnam War. Ann's 11-year-old son, Mikey (Lukas Haas), is deeply attached to Laszlo as are Ann's former in-laws, the blueblood Talbots, who respect Laszlo's hard-working lifestyle and pride in his American citizenship.

Laszlo is a veritable teddy bear to everyone except federal prosecutor Jack Burke (Frederic Forrest), a slippery character with his own secrets and troubled past. When Burke suddenly accuses Laszlo of having committed heinous war crimes over 40 years ago in his native Hungary, his family unites in his defense and Ann argues his case.

Costa-Gavras ("Missing") and screenwriter Joe Eszterhas ("Betrayed") unravel a surprisingly suspenseless thriller that sees Ann's belief in her father slowly eroded by irrefutable evidence pointing to his guilt.

Although we're told that Laszlo has led a humane life in the States, has raised two servants of the American system (an attorney and a Vietnam veteran), and we see

him in loving interplay with his grandson, it's just a show and he's never more than an innocuous cipher with oddly paranoid anti-communist leanings.

Suspense is therefore slight, especially since the truth is obvious from the start. The question of how such an obviously good father and American citizen could have committed the atrocities described by witnesses is asked but never really explored. Also skirted over is the question of how someone should actually react if they found their beloved father not to be a saint after all.

Should he be turned in or protected, especially since he's led such an upstanding life for 40 years? Ann faces that crisis of conscience only in the closing third of the film. This chilling denouement begins with her visit to Hungary in an attempt to bring closure to the case and ends with a startling cycle of events that lead to the inevitable melodramatic conclusion.

"Music Box" pulls its power from this climax which zeroes in on Ann and her personal crisis. How will this lawyer, this daughter, this mother handle information that threatens to destroy her idyllic family forever?

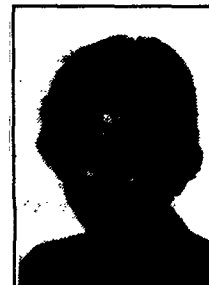
The film raises some fascinating, thought-provoking questions that have no easy answers. For this, "Music Box" should be lauded.

Due to some rough language laced with sexual vulgarities and explicit courtroom testimony about a gang rape and other wartime atrocities, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.



Catholic News Service
Actress Jessica Lange as attorney Ann Talbot defends her father Mike Laszlo, actor Armin Mueller-Stahl, against accusations that he committed unspeakable wartime crimes nearly 50 years earlier in "Music Box." The U.S. Catholic Conference says the film raises some "fascinating, thought-provoking questions." It classifies the film A-III — adults.

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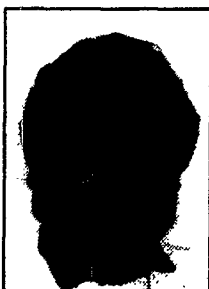


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