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FILM REVIEW

'Regeneration': A Doctor and a Poet Transformed by a War

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By JANET MASLIN

After serving heroically during the first part of World War I and winning a medal for bravery, British poet Siegfried Sassoon famously experienced a change of heart. In 1917, feeling that the war was no longer one he could sanction, he wrote a declaration that cited his objections, a document that was read aloud in Parliament.

Because of this, Sassoon faced a choice between being court-martialed or being sent to a mental hospital. Urged to do the latter by his comrade Robert Graves, he entered Craiglockhart Hospital, a castle just outside of Edinburgh, with his defiance undimmed.

Based on the Booker Prize-winning novel by Pat Barker and adapted thoughtfully by Allan Scott, Gillies Mackinnon's "Regeneration" is about the experiences of Sassoon and a number of shell-shocked soldiers in this institutional setting. It's also about the profound ways in which the doctor who treats them, Dr. William Rivers (Jonathan Pryce), is affected by what he sees and hears.



Alliance Releasing

Jonathan Pryce as Dr. William Rivers in "Regeneration."

Initially confident of the rightness of his views toward warfare, and of his mandate to cure the soldiers and send them back into battle, Rivers is greatly changed by his debates with Sassoon and several other patients. One of them is

Wilfred Owen (Stuart Bunce), encouraged by Sassoon to write the stinging war poetry for which he became posthumously celebrated.

Though "Regeneration" has been ready for a while (I first saw it more than a year ago), it now arrives alongside "Saving Private Ryan" to delve vividly into the experience of the battlefield and the moral questions that combat engenders.

And if this literate, subtly acted film also pales somewhat in comparison to its more spectacular Hollywood counterpart, it stands out as a stirring and articulate exploration of warfare and its consequences.

With battle remembered by the traumatized soldiers as a panorama of muddy horrors, and hauntingly captured by Mackinnon, "Regeneration" addresses difficult questions about what these men can and should do with their futures.

The film presents a catalog of psychic war wounds, from the sudden muteness and memory loss suffered by Billy Prior (Jonny Lee Miller of "Trainspotting"), a tough and embittered working-class soldier, to the damage that subjects another soldier to electroshock therapy. (A long, graphic depiction of the latter is one of the most wrenching sequences here.)

Meanwhile, these men also attempt to make sense -- or, in Owen's case, even art -- of what they have been through. And Rivers finds himself increasingly shaken in his certitude that he can cure such deep-seated injuries or even that he should. The film's best moments present the intense debate that rages between Sassoon and the doctor throughout their shared interlude.

James Wilby, best known here for his starring role in "Maurice," gives Sassoon a dignity and forcefulness that lend urgency to his qualified pacifism, and he makes Sassoon's stature as a poet easy to believe.

And Pryce makes a thoughtful, moving Rivers, a man whose crisis of conscience rises to a par with that of the famous poet. Bunce readily conveys the sensitivity and keenness that distinguished Owen's writing, while Miller seethes formidably as the bitterly rebellious Billy Prior.

Also in the cast is Tanya Allen as Sarah, a young woman who has lost one lover to the war, and whose tenderness becomes part of Billy's cure.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

'REGENERATION'

Directed by Gillies Mackinnon; written by Allan Scott, based on the novel by Pat Barker; director of photography, Glen MacPherson; edited by Pia Di Ciaula; music by Mychael Danna; production designer, Andy Harris; produced by Scott and Peter R. Simpson; released by Alliance.

Running time: 113 minutes.

Rating: This film is not rated.

Cast: Jonathan Pryce (Dr. William Rivers), James Wilby (Siegfried Sassoon), Jonny Lee Miller (Billy Prior), Stuart Bunce (Wilfred Owen), Tanya Allen (Sarah) and Dougray Scott (Robert Graves).

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