

Hero + Horse = Hidalgo!

By Josh Larsen

Paul Bunyan. Johnny Appleseed. Annie Oakley. John Henry. Davy Crockett. America has a rich tradition of folk heroes—one that Walt Disney Pictures, portrayer of many of this country's folk heroes on film, adds to with *Hidalgo*, a live-action adventure movie based on the legend of Frank T. Hopkins.

The worst part of the film is found at the very beginning, when a misleading placard claims the movie is "based on the life of Frank T. Hopkins." In truth, the facts of Hopkins's life are suspect at best. Though Hopkins claimed to be a sort of Forrest Gump of the Old West—surviving Wounded Knee and performing in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, both of which the movie briefly touches on—contemporary scholars have suggested it's all bunk.

Disney turns those myths, however dishonestly, into a rousing living legend. The movie focuses on a 3,000-mile horse race across the sands of the Arabian Desert. Hopkins, played by Viggo Mortensen of the *Lord of the Rings* films, enters the contest as the infidel challenger and rider of a mutt mustang (Hidalgo) in a land of purebred stallions. A portion of the Hopkins legend is that he was part Native American, making horse and master half-breed brothers of sorts, emblems of the American melting pot.

Like most folk tales, *Hidalgo*'s narrative operates on the level of a children's story. If not for the harsh bursts of violence, this would be a wonderful kids movie, full of grand adventures and

heroic deeds. The central contest is less a race than a survival test, with Hopkins facing down lethal thirst, brutal heat, swarming sandstorms, and other forces of nature. Then there are the conniving competitors—led by a British *femme fatale* (Louise Lombard) who is desperate to beat the rough-hewn upstart with her own horse.

Mortensen was one of the most valuable human anchors in the fantasy-laden *Rings* films, and here he is called on to personalize another mythic character. As a folk hero, Hopkins is less a specific individual than an amalgam of all we want an American to be. Mortensen has the common-man charm down pat—the word "pardner" rests naturally on his lips—along with a do-gooder's heart. The only racing rule Hopkins breaks in the desert is the one that forbids the competitors from helping each other, even if one of them is facing death.

Hopkins also has a Western sense of practicality that stands out among the opulent traditions he encounters in the Middle East. Omar Sharif appears as a revered sheik whose horse is favored to win the race, and when Hopkins first walks into the man's lavish tent—stocked with fine fabrics and dishes—his dirty jeans and dangling spurs look sorely out of place. Yet both men are there for a purpose, and soon the relationship between this sheik and cowboy moves from antagonism to curiosity, and eventually, to mutual respect.

Hopkins is pure cowboy—an Ameri-



A wealthy sheik, played by Omar Sharif, invites Frank Hopkins, played by Viggo Mortensen, to enter the greatest endurance horse race ever run.

can archetype. One of the movie's most thrilling moments comes when a boy looking from a watchtower calls out to the crowd below to tell them who is still in the race. After the expected horses appear over the horizon, the boy excitedly shouts, "Cowboy! Cowboy!" And Hopkins gets to be the underdog—something we Americans often think of ourselves as being, even though we rarely are.

Hidalgo has the ability to inspire, so long as you don't subject it to too rigorous of an intellectual test. There are times when the movie's idealism becomes cloying, as when Hopkins first arrives overseas and gazes in confusion at the legal slave trade taking place at the port—as if such practices were foreign to American soil. And as much as I admired *Hidalgo* the horse—especially his stubborn stance at the starting line one morning after Hopkins has decided to call it quits—the idea that a real cowboy would ultimately release his friend to the wild, as the epilogue suggests, rings false.

But if you're willing to forgive such lapses—along with Disney's curious decision to pass off noble folklore as truth—*Hidalgo* has the rambling appeal of a campfire yarn. Paul Bunyan, Annie Oakley, Davy Crockett? *Hidalgo* makes Frank Hopkins stand as tall as any of them.



BookTalk

RUSSIA'S DIRTY WAR

By Peter Brownfeld

A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches From Chechnya

By Anna Politkovskaya

University of Chicago Press, 208 pages, \$25



Anna Politkovskaya, a correspondent for the Moscow biweekly *Novaya Gazeta*, has produced a stirring account of the

horrors in Chechnya. Although she has been imprisoned, tortured, and threatened with rape and murder by Russian soldiers, she continues to report on the suffering of both Chechens and Russians.

Chechnya has intermittently been at war with Russia for centuries. Key moments of Chechnya's tragic history under Russian dominion include a decades-long rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century, armed resistance to the collectivization of 1929-1932, and Siberian exile for all 500,000 Chechens from 1944 to 1957 after Josef Stalin accused them of collaborating with the Germans.

The latest grim chapter in Chechen history began in October 1991, when the republic declared its independence. Russian president Boris Yeltsin, fearing a wave of secessions, was assured by his minister of defense, General Pavel

Grachev, that he would crush the break-away with "one paratroop regiment in two hours."

Despite temporary truces and the Kremlin's depiction of the war as finished, the killing has not stopped. Thousands of Russian soldiers have lost their lives, and as many as a quarter million Chechens have been killed—from a population of 1.1 million. In March 2003, Chechens stated their desire to remain a part of Russia—in a plebiscite that was not sanctioned by any international body and was widely reported to have been riddled with abuses. Meanwhile, the Chechen population continues to suffer intolerably at the hands of the Russian military, while Chechen rebels commit dastardly acts of suicide bombing and hostage-taking.

Politkovskaya's stories suggest that the 100,000 Russian soldiers in Chechnya are simply out of control, routinely kidnapping and torturing Chechens, often releasing them only when relatives or neighbors pay a ransom, even for corpses.

The Russians regularly conduct purges in Chechen towns. These raids are purportedly intended to track down militants and those who harbor them, but judging by Politkovskaya's descriptions, simple profit and sheer sadism are sometimes the motive. Describing a purge in Starye Atagi, she writes that the soldiers "entered the houses and demanded money for the men right away." Ransoms varied by the soldiers' visual appraisal of the home. Sometimes, she claims, ransoms are demanded to avoid rape.

Politkovskaya identifies three groups

fighting in Chechnya: Political rebels who have been fighting from the beginning, with many now verging on simple banditry, sometimes in cooperation with Russian soldiers; the followers of radical Wahabi Islam, many of whom are not Chechen; and those fighting for revenge against previous injustices they or their family members suffered. She has no sympathy for the Wahabis, whom she sees as adding to the hardships of the Chechen people.

The number of those motivated by blood revenge is continuously growing, she says. "There is only one principle guiding the birth of these fighters: the more people get humiliated and hurt, the more units are formed." Some of these resisters are drawn from families who, before the fighting began, "were even hoping for the Russian troops to come and liberate them from the Wahabis."

Politkovskaya also reserves pity for those Russian soldiers in Chechnya who are honest and honorable. They suffer under the command of criminal superiors and indifferent political bosses, and receive beatings or worse for refusing to comply with the institutional brutality.

Because of Russian president Vladimir Putin's refusal to rein in Russia's soldiers, Politkovskaya is pessimistic about the future: "The only thing the methods of this war accomplish is to recruit new terrorists and resistance fighters, and to rouse hatred."

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