

## Further Thoughts on: Quisling: The Final Days

Quisling - the final days delivers a intense tragedy of intellectual heft and profound relevance, crafted by cinematic artists in full command of their storytelling. While many directors prefer to platform heroes, director Erik Poppe is fascinated by holding complex, disreputable characters up to scrutiny. For Poppe, there is nothing absorbing about a one-note monster. His purpose is instructive: history with a human perspective. In staging a moral contest between two flawed opponents, Poppe examines authoritarianism (treacherous Quisling) and humanism (Pastor Peder Olsen). Blessed with a meticulous script inspired by the contemporaneous notebook of Peder and Heidi Olsen, with the encouragement of their descendants, Poppe unwinds the story of a good man wrestling for the soul of a bad man. In the process he makes us question our own assumptions about these characterisations.

The dubious Quisling, twice rejected by the Norwegian electorate, a documented anti-semitic since 1935 with a failed coup of 1940 behind his national socialist party, finds with the German invasion (and the relocation away from Oslo of King and Government) the opportunity to declare himself prime minister and install a pro-Nazi regime. Quisling came to be known as the Norwegian Hitler, and the crimes he stood accused of at war's end included deporting innocent Jewish citizens to camps in Poland, and supporting the German war effort. Pastor Olsen - chaplain at a mental hospital considered expert in difficult psychiatric cases - was appointed by his bishop to lead the imprisoned Quisling to contrition. What follows is an eviscerating moral reckoning in the form of dialogue between corrupted Quisling (unable to admit to weakness) and Pastor Olsen (conscientiously determined to extract an admission of culpability).

One of Poppe's themes is the emotional machinery of fascism : what led an academically brilliant military officer from a long line of clergymen to make a pact with the devil. Court-approved psychiatrists found no evidence of mental disfunction, concluding Quisling was "normal". A school friend testified that Quisling was painfully shy, often alone, believed to have an inferiority complex, and subject to delusions. Quisling boasted to Olsen that he turned loneliness to a virtue by striving to be the best, that "the strongest man in the world is he who stands alone". Quisling does become paranoid about communist conspiracies, using this to justify his Nazi collaboration by claiming it was the strategic choice of a lesser evil. While undergoing legal trial, it becomes clear that Quisling converted his countrymen's repugnance for his character and actions into a personal badge of honour.

With a spiritual battle as the narrative framework, Poppe's scriptwriting team gives us contrasting scenes, among which is the forest grave of murdered Norwegian political prisoners and resisters, where we are confronted with Quisling's callous detachment. This is positioned against the Olsen couple's anguish over the fate of their Jewish neighbours - after the choice made to give them up in their own family's best interests - learning at trial that only 12 of the affected 1,000 deportees returned alive. In search of retribution, we're shown the site of execution, with Quisling facing his firing squad with thought only to his personal legacy. Finally we have a meditation on rebuilding after trauma, and the possibility of hope.

Cinematographer Jonas Alarik shows us Quisling's constricted soul, using tightly framed prison cell images, angled to increase our discomfort. Quisling's face is brutally spotlit. In service of a towering performance, Quisling is shot from below, chin jutting, trapped in hubris. His isolation is visually captured in large waiting rooms with restrained palette, in which he sits, small and implacably alone. In contrast, the claustrophobic cell has walls of brackish dark green, conveying the fraught atmosphere of accusation. Alarik compares the intimate lives of the protagonists: Quisling's unwelcoming house draped in luxurious crimson, the couple posed stiffly in front of servants. This is an undemonstrative cohabitation bolstered with formality and status markers. The Olsen home however is comfortable, well-lived in and humble, the couple living purposefully in true partnership. And beautifully shot, the film's last scene gives us the Pastor sitting in contemplation among trees as night falls. Wrongdoing has been confronted and punished, and this simple moment of reflection suggests the enduring worth of living an ethical, spiritual life. Olsen (like Poppe) asserts "my job is to instil hope in others".

Soundscape by Jonas Colstrup is full of repetitive discord, representing appalling events overwhelmingly ignored in general complicity. In a test of our aural tolerance, the menacingly droned low notes, intrusive clanking unmusical sounds are like howls from the grave, almost as forceful a narrative presence as the horrifying sound in recent film *The Zone of Interest*. The visceral prolonged tension in sound heightens the story's dramatic impact.

As Quisling, Gard B. Eidsvold invests the role with personal gravitas - the actor's father was tortured under the puppet regime. Eidsvold struts, bug-eyed, with clenched jaw, imperial bearing and an almost Hitlerian manner. It's an exceptional performance, by turns self-pitying, resentful, combative, coiled with anger. As Pastor Olsen, Anders Danielsen Lie embodies truthful self-examination, a man living in grief at his own action of familial protection "instead of helping two people in need". His own flaws require atonement, before he can provide any Christian leadership toward Quisling's repentance. He is a man with moral compass, armed only with faith and love. Unlike Vanderbilt's Nuremberg (2025) where Russell Crowe's superb Goering was let down by Rami Malek's histrionics, Poppe here has two seasoned and evenly-matched players. Their emotionally resonant performances are capably supported

by Lisa Loven Kongsli as Heidi Olsen, representing sincerity and service to others; and even more by Lisa Carlehed as Maria Quisling. Poppe though the quality of her acting in rehearsal warranted an enlarged role in his film. In life, Maria was an admirer of Hitler who professed disinterest in politics, a woman who needed her own personal Fuhrer. Also a loner, she exhorted Quisling to fight until the last bullet. Poignantly, there's no evidence of an official marriage. Perhaps the success they both work hard at projecting has this gnawing inauthenticity behind jointly warped ambition, and her eventual reclusion. Quisling could write that he loved her, but Maria was unable to hear the words spoken in face of her wrenching demand. Here is pathos, certainly, but no sympathy from viewers.

Camus said that cynical and despairing people embrace authoritarianism, including its inhuman outcomes. Unrepentant at the last, Quisling meets his "destiny" convinced he saved Norway from being a theatre of war. He preferred to be judged as loyal to his beliefs and actions. He has nothing to confess. Poppe and his artists succeed in creating a nuanced, provocative and beautiful work about an irredeemable bastard. We react with recharged empathy for our own Jewish friends and neighbours, whose hearts carry the profound ancestral burden of historical witness. Authoritarian poison is once again infecting our world, and new tragic populations are suffering. Faced with the choice of indifference or resistance, this cinematic achievement prompts us to ask ourselves where on the long arc of justice we see our own lives. Poppe means us to leave his film exhausted but with renewed hope. However faint a glimmer, it must be cherished.

**Amanda Noakes**