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What war's horror did to three men

THE DEER HUNTER (ABC, Shaftesbury Avenue, "X," 182 minutes) tells how three working men from a small Pennsylvanian town volunteer for the Vietnam war and are captured and tortured by the Vietcong.

Although they manage to escape and rejoin their own side, it becomes a question of how each will be able to survive the future years.

For one loses his legs, the second is broken in mind by what he has endured and the third, on eventually getting back to America, cannot bear to face his home town's welcoming ceremony.

It is an extraordinarily powerful and moving film, and one of the most striking things about it is the way even in the midst of the most brutal horrors of war and of the aftermath of desolation for the bereaved back home, it manages to celebrate what is noble in mankind.

Indeed, this is one of the themes of the film. Like some Norse saga of our times it hurls men into a fiery furnace and reveals how one of them has that extra edge in character and luck to come through strengthened as well as scorched.

Facing fire is the film's metaphor right from its stunning opening shots of the three, Steve, Nick and Michael, steelworkers of Russian family origin, labouring in the searing maw of what could be Vulcan's forge.

Their valley town looks grey and grim and yet they are enormously cheerful people, part of a community that holds with pride to what is good from its ethnic background.

CHOIR

With admirable assurance director Michael Cimino takes considerable time at the beginning of his three-hour film to let us get to know the chief characters and the result is that we care deeply about what happens to them.

For 25 minutes we are carried along through the colour and emotion of a Russian Orthodox wedding ceremony and reception, as Steven (John Savage) marries Angela.

The wedding hymn sung by the mixed church choir in full, rich voice, and the high spirits of the whirling Slavonic dancing, and the final seal of the occasion as the couple are handed a brimming loving cup with the adjuration that it will be good luck for the rest of their lives if they drink it without spilling a drop so affects Nick (Christopher Walken) that he gazes down into the eyes of his girl (Meryl Streep) and

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right there asks her to marry him.

"Okay," she gulps, even though it is only hours before he and Steven, and their buddy, Michael, leave for Vietnam. It is a moment of high emotion, suddenly tinged with fear for any viewer of a superstitious nature, as the camera catches a drop of wine falling to stain Angela's bridal gown.

There is a strong romantic feel to many of these establishing sequences, particularly just after the wedding as Michael and Nick with some of their buddies take off to the high mountains with their rifles for a last deer hunt before Vietnam.

Here, up where the clouds are being made, or so it seems in Vilmos Zsigmond's superb photography, Michael (Robert de Niro) emerges as the leader, graceful, princely and quietly disapproving of the levity of some of his comrades about the business of taking the life of a majestic stag.

It is not my intention to

spoil this stunning, British-financed film for you by revealing too much more.

This first hour is so peacefully enjoyable that it makes all the more shattering the jump cut with which Cimino suddenly hurls us into the Vietnam war and into a sequence of degradation and torture so realistically shot that it is almost unbearable even if you assure yourself that you are, after all, watching only actors.

Such acting. In *The Deer Hunter* you could scarcely wish any part played any other way than it is by a truly excellent cast, with Robert de Niro growing to memorable stature as Michael who, forced by his Vietcong captors to play Russian roulette—load a revolver with one bullet, spin the cylinder and pull the trigger with the gun against his own head—while they gamble on the chances of it going off, has the character to conquer his fear and look for a way out, not just for himself, but for his frailer buddies too.

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