

# Necessary reminders

Submitted by Kimberly Gadette on Wed, 04/29/2009 - 07:24.



Between the end of 2008 and now, moviegoers have had a choice of six big-budget feature films focusing on Holocaust themes. **Kimberly Gadette** wonders if prior Prime Minister Abba Eban got it right when he said, "There's no business like shoah business"? Or is Hollywood just following orders?

Speaking of orders, there's often a two-fold dictate to the year-end films: they're either full of holiday cheer or bleak with death-infused despair. Perhaps that's why *It's a Wonderful*

*Life* was and continues to be such a hit – it's an unholy holiday mix of both.

Which brings us to this last, past December: the Christmassy, red-ribbon cheer of *Nothing Like the Holidays*, *Four Christmases*, and *Marley & Me* versus the dried, bone-marrow drear of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, *The Reader*, *Good*, *Adam Resurrected*, *Valkyrie*, and – as a fitting, final finger to the ever-critical Oscar voter – *Defiance*.

Before looking at why Holocaust films are currently as numerous as the points on the Star of David, let's take a truncated Teutonic tour:

First, in a weak echo of 1982's *Sophie's Choice*, we get the dead child tearjerker dressed up as *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (the title nodding to the horrific uniform of the doomed concentration camp dweller). Though some of the performances were stand-outs, including Vera Farmiga's fashion-plate mother, whose eyes slowly open to the murderous actions of her highly-decorated commandant husband, we see the ending approaching about an hour before the final scene.



Another highly-decorated commandant, Tom Cruise's Claus von Stauffenberg, is a German colonel missing far more than an eye and a few fingers. Scheisse! Where did he misplace his character? When the likes of *Valkyrie*'s Tom Wilkinson, Bill Nighy and Eddie Izzard come off no better than wooden soldiers in an overly elaborate, singularly dull film, then any remaining fingers should be pointed at the filmmakers themselves. Any nominations here? Nein!

Aside from the one-eyed Cruise, other figurative blind eyes occur in conjunction with career advancement in both *Good*, in which Viggo Mortensen's quiet professor authors a book that makes him an SS superstar overnight, and *The Reader*, in which Kate Winslet's illiterate Hanna grabs the chance for employment as a Nazi guard, merely going along to get along. As Hanna grabs, so does Kate - who's collected a cache of wins including the Oscar that had until now eluded her - for her performance as an über humorless Feminazi, as severe in the bathtub with her teenage lover as she is decades later behind bars, needing a good tweezer far more than a good man.



From the Jewish point of view, we get Jeff Goldblum's Adam, barking with all abandon at the behest of his stern master, Willem Dafoe, in *Adam Resurrected*. The quirky film is unfortunately, oddly executed; though the critics summarily hated it, no one dared throw a shoe ... for fear Adam would simply chew on it.

Lastly comes *Defiance*, the 2008 version of *Schindler's List* taking place in the Belorussian Forest, when secular Jewish brothers are thrust into helping their own. Though many of the ensuing rag-tag community can't survive the one-two punch of harsh winters and harsher German tanks, the Bielski clan survives amid moral and ethical uncertainty, when the militant dictum of kill-or-be-killed trumps the Golden Rule. Of the six, this is the one quasi feel-good, look-mameleh-we-survived film. It even made good with Oscar, getting a nomination for Best Score.



So! Let the Gestapo guessing games begin – why so many?

First, there's the obvious agenda for prestige and profit. Let's call it the "Blingtime for Hitler and Germany" argument, in which the current studios hope to make their German mark a la *Schindler's List*, *It's a Beautiful Life* and 2007's *The Counterfeiters*. Even without garnering a single nomination, *Valkyrie* has already grossed over \$121 million worldwide.

Next, there's the argument of perspective. Given that the last few years' films on Iraq have been relative failures, the story of personal and/or nationalistic accountability in war is often easier to swallow when coated in historical fiction. We don't want to know about our soldiers dying today – it seems our collective eye may be as blind as Colonel von Stauffenberg's. But give us a solid story and great acting, as in an *Atonement* or a *Saving Private Ryan*, and we'll flock to the cinema. Even 2004's *Hotel Rwanda* succeeded in appealing to a wide audience from a distance of merely twelve years' prior. Though we can't as yet dispassionately look upon Darfur or Iraq, the box office numbers illustrate our readiness to jump to the parallel constructs from histories past.



Of these half-dozen year-end films, many have decried an obvious agenda. In his 1999 book, *Selling the Holocaust*, author Tim Cole states: "The mourning over the six million Jews who perished in Europe is symbolically transformed into a celebration of the approximately five million Jews living in America today." On honoring the past genocide, Rabbi Irwin Kula, president of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership states: "You look at the victim, remember the evil, you pass judgment on some distant event and you forget that the potential for evil, small or large, is within us ... But let's be honest. People do the pilgrimage to it, they cry, then they go out to eat that evening. It doesn't affect anything. It doesn't create empathy. It creates sentimentalism."

Yet, sentimentalism aside, here's the thing: without film, we will no longer own a collective memory of what happened to all those victims in striped pajamas. From the thick of the war, approximately 1939, to now, equals a span of 70 years. That number represents the approximate average life span of a human being. Meaning that we are on the precipice of losing the last remaining few who were born to the hell of WWII, who might still testify to the truth of the Holocaust. Without a living testament, all that remains are the stories told through books and celluloid. Leaving the vacated concentration camp doors wide open for the Holocaust deniers who make the headlines on a frequent, if not daily, basis.



Earlier this year, Pope Benedict XVI moved to reinstate Bishop Richard Williamson, a man who coldly and calmly denied the WWII Jewish genocide. When pressed, he allowed that instead of six million, maybe 200,000–300,000 Jews had died, and that "there were no gas chambers."

When we have to contend with the likes of a Bishop Williamson, as well as the Pope who initially overlooked his statements; when we have to hear the constant rantings of a Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who states that Israel must be "wiped off the map," echoing the desires of the earlier Ayatollah Khomeini; when we have to watch anti-Semites rioting on the streets of Florida's Fort Lauderdale, screaming that the Jews should "Go back to the ovens!"; when we read that Hamas and Hezbollah threaten to nuke Israel on a daily basis – then perhaps it is the very power of film, and only film, that may just keep a people alive.

Rather than prior generations of avid readers, most of us now rely primarily on the images playing on the screen before our eyes. Whether it's as big as an IMAX or as small as an iPhone, it is the screen that aids in the formulation of our thoughts. Our opinions. Our very memories. With the septuagenarian documentarians vanishing, if we take away the moving pictures of the Holocaust, we may just draw one frightening blank.

Longtime producer Harvey Weinstein defends the films, stating, "What a wonderful subject to explore in as many ways as possible. I hope our children get educated about the Holocaust, so it will be 'Never again'."

Sure, it's an old message, and we've heard it a hundred times before. But given the ongoing state of religious intolerance, whether the films are classy or pure schmaltz, profitable or not, deserving of awards or rotten tomatoes, it seems that we may need to hear – and definitely see – that same message a thousand times over.

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- Here on Indie, you can watch two films that centre on the Holocaust and its impact. *The Boat is Full* is a nail-biting WWII drama, in which a group of Jewish refugees fleeing to Switzerland have to pretend to be a family to escape deportation and death. *Left Luggage*, starring Isabella Rossellini, is a gripping drama about a Jewish family in 1970s Antwerp, struggling to overcome the legacy of the Holocaust.

#### **Release dates:**

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* - out on DVD now

*Defiance* - out on DVD now

*Valkyrie* - out on DVD 19 May

*The Reader* - out on DVD 25 May

*Adam Resurrected* - TBC

*Good* received a limited US release. It has been showing in UK cinemas since 17 April

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