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# 'Inglourious Basterds' (sic)

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Sep. 2, 2009

Brad Pitt stars in a scene from the movie "Inglourious Basterds." (CNS photo/Weinstein Company)

Writer/director Quentin Tarantino's latest film is a masterpiece -- of sorts. It is pure cinema, pure theater, and entertaining. It is also brilliant, beautiful to look at, and intensely violent. I think it is one of Tarantino's most Coen brothers-type movies, though a case could be made for "Pulp Fiction" (1995).

The difference between Tarantino and the Coen brothers is that with Joel and Ethan there is always some kind of really smart joke or ironic twist going on; with Tarantino, there is another dimension. He is always commenting on movies and television using classy in-your-face techniques that entail violence -- lots of it. He creatively repackages everything he has ever experienced through movies and television programs and wraps it tightly in a bizarre story and propels it at the audience. There is no subtlety here.

The place is Nazi-occupied France; the time is World War II. Brad Pitt ("The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" 2008) plays Lt. Aldo Raine, from Alabama. He gathers a group of Allied Jewish soldiers and charges them with killing 100 Nazis and bringing their scalps to him. Raine's nemesis is Col. Hans Landa (Austrian actor Christoph Waltz) who can speak English, French, Italian and German. Fluently.

In the film's too-long introduction Col. Landa's evil nature and Nazi loyalty is established when he slaughters a Jewish family in hiding. But he allows a girl, Shosanna Dreyfus, to escape - sure that he will catch her later. Four years go by.

Raine's men are now on the hunt. Shosanna (brilliantly played by Melanie Laurent) has grown into a beauty and runs a movie theater left her by relatives. She and her black lover, Marcel (Jacky Ido), who is also the projectionist, plan to kill all the leaders of the Nazi party who are to attend the premiere of a pro-Nazi film. Raine and his men, with the help of a famous actress/secret agent Bridget von Hammersmark (Diane Kruger) unknowingly plan the same thing. The two sides come together in a combustible finale -- but that is not the end because I won't give that away.

What is "Inglourious Basterds" about? It is about putting on a really good show. Brad Pitt will probably garner some award nominations, but did you ever notice he hardly ever moves in a film? He kind of just poses? He does pull off the comedic pretty well, however, much like he did in last year's Coen brothers' film "Burn after Reading." Christoph Waltz is an incredible, versatile actor that we detest from beginning to end. Diane Kruger, the actress playing an actress, is good. But the stellar performance comes from the Oscar-worthy Melanie Laurent; her face is the window to her soul.

Again, what is "Inglourious Basterds" about? As with most cinema, film is the externalization of inner realities. "Basterds" gives audiences the opportunity to fight the Nazis, to wreak revenge, to avenge the atrocities of World War II; to live the hindsight of those who could have done something but didn't, or were defenseless victims. Here, the powerless, the oppressed, are empowered to kill those who are killing them. At times the film felt like a Western to me. Raines and his men were the cowboys out killing Indians (note the Ennio Morricone sound at the beginning; he also scored the music for Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns including the 1966 "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly".) If "Inglourious Basterds" sounds like a hodge-podge, it is. And it all happens in a moral universe that had been so violated by the Nazis that ethics become relative. In Tarantino's universes, and in our own television, movie, and video game worlds, violence breeds so much violence that all humanity suffers from the inability to distinguish right from wrong that ensues.

I don't know about you, but when I finish seeing a Tarantino film, I know I have seen something brilliant and intelligent. But I am not sure the rough ride was worth it. I am not that curious about what goes on inside Tarantino's head: he puts it on the screen for all to see. I don't think he trusts the audience enough. Does he know any other ways to tell a story?

Yet, if he is reflecting back to us what he has assimilated from television and movies, this ought to give us pause to reflect on the media makers and story-tellers that we are educating and forming in our pews, living rooms and classrooms today. Will they digest the violence they experience and turn it into art? Tarantino is doing it, but why? Maybe because he can.

Now, the Coen brothers' films are often violent but can be deeply funny, ironic and absurd. These guys interest me. I would love to see an MRI of what goes on in their brains. Remember the likeable loser Dude (Jeff Bridges) in "The Big Lebowski" speaking wistfully about the carpet that the dog peed on and started all the "action"? "That rug really tied the room together."

Nihilism is very chic. And I think I like the Dude more than Lt. Raine. I'd rather laugh than groan.

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