

MAY 7, 1999 21 IYAR, 5759

Hitler Viewed in an 'Empty Mirror'

By Naomi Pfefferman, *Entertainment Editor*

When the Dalai Lama visited Israel several years ago, the story goes, someone asked him whether Hitler had possessed "Buddha nature." The Tibetan holy man nodded. Every person possesses Buddha nature; it's our attachments and delusions that result in our suffering and in behaviors that cause suffering for others, he stated. How did the Israelis respond to the Dalai Lama?

"He got hissed," says filmmaker Barry J. Hershey, who's tackled the Führer himself in a hallucinatory, complex, blackly comic psychobiography, "The Empty Mirror," which, he says, is heavily influenced by Buddhist texts.

So far, Hershey, a Harvard Law School graduate and former corporate CEO who left business to make films 20 years ago, hasn't been hissed. But, he admits, his movie may offend some simply because it doesn't depict Hitler as evil incarnate. Rather, his uneven but fascinating feature debut, filmed by David Lynch cinematographer Frederick Elmes, explores the Führer's ghastly delusions and wonders what would happen if he had survived the war and was forced to reflect upon his horrific deeds.

In a dank bunker, or perhaps hell, Hitler (Norman Rodway) obsesses over Nazi newsreels, meets with Freud, Eva Braun and Goebbels (Joel Grey) and conducts a review of his life that causes him to descend into madness. He spews racist diatribes, reveals his fascination with blonds and muses, "The Jews take their removal so personally."

The film, which has been compared to Hans-Huergen Syberberg's "Our Hitler," is sometimes heavy-handed and distinctly noncommercial. But it also raises issues about Hitler's mind and deeds that are engaging and timely.

When a fawning Goebbels remarks upon the countless books and films now devoted to Hitler, the Führer remarks: "There's my Thousand Year Reich. We gave them all much to brood over, didn't we?"

In the aftermath of the mass murder by Hitler-obsessed teens in Littleton, Colo., the character's words achieve eerie significance.

"The Empty Mirror" opens May 7 at Laemmle's Music Hall in Beverly Hills. For more information, call (310) 274-6869.