

Even now, Hitler edits our imagination

'The Empty Mirror' explores nether world of Der Fuehrer's mind.

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By Joe Leydon

May 6 - For a movie that has been bumping around the international festival circuit for more than two years, *The Empty Mirror*; seems remarkably fresh and, alas, compellingly relevant.

SET TO KICK OFF a long-delayed commercial release in several major cities this weekend, Barry J. Hershey's wildly uneven but fitfully brilliant chamber drama is worth going out of your way to see, and discomfortingly chilling to experience.

Obviously inspired by "Our Hitler," filmmaker Hans-Jurgen Syberberg's epic seven-hour meditation on Der Fuehrer, Hershey's more intimate and much shorter fantasia imagines an unrepentant Adolf Hitler (Norman Rodway) working on his post-World War II memoirs in some nether-worldly inner sanctum. Or, more likely, in his own private corner of hell.

Occasionally, the immortal monster prompts his memory with film clips (snippets from home movies shot by Eva Braun, selections from Leni Riefenstahl's infamous "Triumph of the Will"), or entertains sycophantic visitors who, like him, haven't aged a day since 1945. At times, Hitler attempts nothing more substantial than image-conscious spin. ("I was the victim of my generals!") At other times, however, he egomaniacally riffs on his undiminished ability to warp minds, blacken hearts and inflame hatreds.

'STILL KILLING'

While he rants, you can't help thinking of contemporary crimes against humanity - ethnic cleansing, hate crimes, racist thuggery - and, inevitably, the savagery of the Hitler-worshipping teenagers during last month's carnage in Littleton, Colorado. As Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel recently noted: "Even in death, Hitler is still killing."

When he isn't dictating his revisionist memoirs to an increasingly dubious typist (Doug McKeon, all grown up since "On Golden Pond"), Hitler trades remembrances with Eva Braun (Camilla Soeberg), Hermann Goering (Glenn Shadix) and, most interestingly, Joseph Goebbels (an extraordinarily effective Joel Grey). Ever the fawning functionary, Goebbels expresses admiration for Hitler's "artistry" in establishing his Thousand-Year Reich.

"History," he tells Hitler, "is an error to be rewritten by the visionary playwright. Compared to you, Wagner was a minimalist."

Periodically, Sigmund Freud (Peter Michael Goetz) pops by to pose pointed questions about Hitler's life and crimes. ("So, what are we to learn from your actions?") But Hitler, sneeringly disdainful of the Jewish psychiatrist, refuses to take part in the mind games. "The roots of National Socialism," he tells Freud, "are hidden in secret places. They are beyond your grasp."

In synopsis, "The Empty Mirror" may sound ludicrously pretentious. On screen, it occasionally is even worse than that. And yet, each time you're ready to throw up your hands and head for the door, director Hershey and co-screenwriter R. Buckingham come up with something audaciously inspired. And that's when Rodway - whose performance as Hitler is a canny balance of prideful fanaticism and anxious rationalization - is truly mesmerizing.

HITLER AS AUTEUR

Hitler insists to Goering that "only" 5.7 million Jews - not 6 million, as is customarily reported - were killed in the death camps. ("History likes round numbers," Goering explains.) Besides, many more gypsies, Communists and political prisoners were exterminated. "And yet," Hitler peevishly complains, "the Jews take their removal so personally!"

Later, Hitler's mood brightens as he considers his unflagging grip on the imagination of scholars and historians. Goebbels, gleefully pointing to thousands upon thousands of books, movies and college courses devoted to Hitler, predicts: "You will be the source of endless fascination." Hitler agrees: "There's my Thousand-Year Reich. We gave them all much to brood over - didn't we, Joseph?"

Unlike Syberberg's "Our Hitler," which viewed its subject as the manifestation of the German people's collective will, "The Empty Mirror" gives us a portrait of Hitler as the ultimate auteur, a demented director who made the world his soundstage while bringing his personal vision to fruition. Willfully ignoring the harsh reviews that history has given his masterpiece, he boasts: "I have edited the imagination of people not yet born." It's hard to quibble with that appraisal. Just ask some of the folks who used to live in Kosovo. Or the survivors of the murdered in Littleton.

For all its flaws and excesses, "The Empty Mirror" offers provocative insights into the reasons why, even now, Adolf Hitler continues to work his black magic. More than a half-century after his death, he remains malevolently alive as the larger-than-life paradigm of evil incarnate that haunts our hearts and minds. And our movie screens. "Film is the magician's mirror," Der Fuehrer tells a raptly attentive audience of Hitler Youth. "It is the first art form which allows the artist to project his dreams and fantasies into the inner life of the viewer. To reshape and capture his soul. My works of destruction and grandeur will live on. I am the artist. I am the artwork."