

Mirroring the Mind of a Madman / Film imagines what Hitler thought of his mad deeds

Peter Stack, Chronicle Staff Critic Published 4:00 am, Friday, May 21, 1999



THE EMPTY MIRROR: Drama. Starring Norman Rodway, Joel Grey, Camilla Soeberg. Directed by Barry J. Hershey. (Not rated. 115 minutes. At the Kabuki.)

Chilling, a bit ridiculous yet fascinating, "The Empty Mirror" is a drama imagining Adolph Hitler holed up in a bunker ruminating on his life and dictating his memoirs while he watches newsreels of his rise and dark turn in history.

Can one spend nearly two hours examining Hitler as a madman contemplating mad deeds?

The answer is a measured yes, when the fictional Hitler is played by veteran British actor Norman Rodway (best known for his legendary performances with the Royal Shakespeare Company).

Rodway's bellowing, sometimes pleading tour-de-force is so extraordinary that it's almost scary to watch.

STARTLING RESEMBLANCE

Writer-director Barry Hershey, making his feature debut with this film, seamlessly focuses on the real face of Hitler as shown in photographs or newsreels, and superimposes the face of Rodway. The likeness is startling and the bleed of one image into the other so convincing there's hardly a second one doesn't believe he's seeing Hitler himself.

But matching images is only one aspect of this dense, provocative film. The idea isn't so much to discredit or demonize Hitler -- he did that well enough for himself -- but to regard him as a human strutting or stewing in his own humanity. The result is a bit like witnessing a confession by somebody who's so self-righteous that he's belligerent without being aware of it.

The script, co-written by Hershey, juxtaposes its fictional contemplation of Hitler with facts about, and visions of, the real man. The fictional Hitler gazes at newsreels or regards his own huge media image, sometimes in a rage, sometimes pouting that history has misunderstood him (he's upset, for example, that **Time magazine** named him Man of the Year only once while other world leaders were honored more often).

SELF-DELUDED PROTAGONIST

Self-analyzing, sometimes with a shudder of regret, the film's fictional Hitler says he was made to dominate -- but what's wrong with that, it's only human? He dictates notions about himself to an obedient typist. He tries to explain his aims, the dashed dreams he had for Germany, and belabors his rigid sense of moral purpose, which only underscores how self-deluded he was.

The film has a slightly claustrophobic, one-man-show quality, but the scope is expanded by apparitions of a coterie -- confidante **Joseph Goebbels** (Joel Grey), mistress **Eva Braun** (Camilla Soeberg), military strategist **Hermann Goering** (Glenn Shadix), even Jewish psychologist **Sigmund Freud** (**Peter Michael Goetz**).

The footage of Hitler was taken from archival films and Holocaust newsreels and from the Nazi propaganda film "Triumph of the Will" by **Leni Riefenstahl**. Also included are sequences from home movies made by Braun.