



EMPTY MIRROR, THE

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-By Ed Kelleher

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Jan Kershaw, the noted biographer of Adolf Hitler, once listed that German dictator's principal characteristics as will, fantasy and brutality. All three of those attributes can be found in British actor Norman Rodway's spellbinding portrayal of the Fuhrer in *The Empty Mirror*, Barry J. Hershey's vivid, unsettling film, which imagines the final defeated days Hitler spent in a Berlin bunker at the end of World War II. A bold, demanding film that plunges the viewer into a realm of surrealist fantasy, *The Empty Mirror* isn't for the casual moviegoer, but it challenges the thoughtful viewer to look at Hitler through a prism detached from historical time.

'Germany is not worthy of me!' a dejected Hitler complains while pacing his underground retreat. Hershey's screenplay, written with R. Buckingham, imagines the German dictator as something of a cultural revisionist, wrestling with his own tortured psyche, dictating his memoirs, debating an imaginary Sigmund Freud (Peter Michael Goetz)-even committing a Freudian slip-and interacting with such phantoms as mistress Eva Braun (Camilla Soeberg), propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels (Joel Grey) and military mastermind Hermann Goering (Glenn Shadix).

As played by Rodway of Royal Shakespeare Company renown, the Fuhrer is also something of a film revisionist, thanks to longtime David Lynch cinematographer Frederick Elmes, whose recently developed technology projects continuous images behind a constantly changing foreground. So while Rodway as Hitler bemoans his lot in life, we see an ongoing visual display-from German newsreels, Leni Riefenstahl's documentaries, even Braun's home movies-which provides a look at that life in a backgrounding flow behind the present narrative. 'I am the artist, I am the artwork,' Hitler boasts, characterizing film as 'the magician's mirror.'

Politics and art often brush against each other in Hershey's film, as when Goebbels links 'Hitler, Wagner and voyeurism.' Not to be outdone, the Fuhrer claims to be 'the greatest actor in Europe.' Reminded that, compared to Wagner, he is a minimalist, Hitler retreats into self-doubt. 'Do I look more mysterious in a hat?' he wonders. He muses about his memoirs *Mein Kampf*, wondering why foreign publishers insist on using the German title. At times, *The Empty Mirror* steps back from the horror of Hitler's deeds to suggest a curiously lighter tone, not that far removed from Peter Sellers in *Dr. Strangelove* or Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*.

Portraying a historical character as vile as Hitler cannot be an easy task for an actor, but Hershey's direction distances us sufficiently from the Fuhrer, even though the screenplay has him note, with precious little irony, that 'I am the perfect reflection of every man with a lust to dominate.' More disturbingly, as the clock ticks down on Hitler's life, we see traces of something approaching a repentant Hitler. But the ending to *The Empty Mirror* is carved in history, which forecloses any emotion even approaching sympathy.

--Ed Kelleher

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