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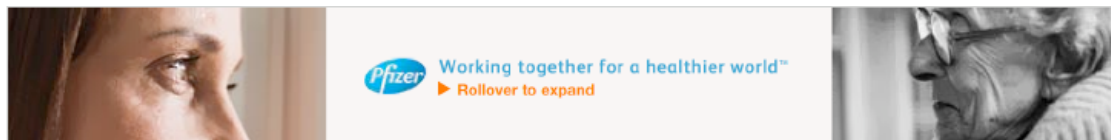
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Books & Arts

Film: "Inglourious Basterds"
Making the unfunny funny

Aug 27th 2009
From *The Economist* print edition

But better if you don't see this as a film about the Holocaust



Imagenet

Chilling and charming

firmly in focus during scenes of extraordinarily explicit bloodletting. Yet this reviewer found it impossible not to enjoy them.

This is partly because the film is, at one level, just a good old revenge fantasy, an echo of the superhero comic-book genre. But it is also because Mr Tarantino, although he kills off goodies as well as baddies, works hard to efface sympathy for all of them. Only once do truly innocent people die, and they do so off-camera. For the rest, his characters are either psychotics, such as the charming and chilling SS colonel (played by the superb Christoph Waltz, pictured) and the engaging but equally crazy American officer (Brad Pitt); or cartoon cut-outs such as a suave British agent and a Jewish baseball slugger; or good folk, such as the Jewess and the German who loves her, who are twisted by war into maniacs.

Mr Tarantino may be trying to prove that he, the acknowledged king of detoxified death porn, can make murder fun even in one of the unfunniest chapters in

IT WAS bold of Quentin Tarantino and his producer, Harvey Weinstein, to pre-screen their brutal, wisecracking, revisionist war film at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. In "Inglourious Basterds" the Jews have the last laugh on Hitler—but so bloodthirstily that one might wonder whether the director is trying to say that anyone who enjoys seeing Nazis die horribly en masse is morally no better than they were.

It is a safe bet that the master of post-modern cinematic irony intended nothing so simplistic as this. But what, then, did he intend?

Technically, this film is at least as good as any that Mr Tarantino has made, and richer than any of them in incongruous humour, cinematic insider references and graphic violence. A hit squad of American Jewish soldiers and a French Jewess living in Paris converge in a pair of outlandish plots to kill the Nazi high command. The camera stays

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human history. This is a hollow achievement if it depends on keeping the audience entertained but disengaged. Indeed, the nub of many of the negative reviews is that, faced with the Holocaust, Mr Tarantino avoids tricky moral issues.

But perhaps that is to misunderstand this film. Maybe it is not a movie about the Holocaust but a sophisticated piece of self-mockery. The blood-drenched climactic scene, which takes place in a cinema showing another gory war movie, rather supports that view. If it is right "Inglourious Basterds" is a glorious success—just not one worth taking seriously.

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