

Second City Tzivi's February '06 Spotlight



*Mossad agents assassinate
a Palestinian terrorist in Athens.*
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Munich Receives Five Oscar Nominations

By JAN LISA HUTTNER

The Academy Award nominations for 2006 were announced on January 31, and Steven Spielberg's controversial new film *MUNICH* received a total of five nominations: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Editing, and Best Original Score. By this time, you may well have read all the articles you'll ever want to read about *MUNICH*, but given this unexpectedly high number of nominations, I've decided to jump into the fray and weigh in on *MUNICH* myself. Looked at in purely cinematic terms, I thought the screenwriting was lazy and the direction was uneven, so why so much fuss about a mediocre action flick?

IS *MUNICH* A GOOD FILM?

Wearing my film critic's hat, what I saw was a fairly conventional movie with a routine three-act structure. Like Spielberg's WWII epic *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*, *MUNICH* starts strong, has a weak middle, and overworks its supposedly humanistic finale.

The opening section, which dramatizes the murder of eleven Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists at the 1972 Munich Olympics, is heart-wrenching, with dramatic crosscutting between the athletes and their captors, the news media, and the Israeli and Palestinian families watching events play-out on their television sets. Once all the athletes and most of the terrorists are dead, the scene shifts from Germany to Israel, where Prime Minister Golda Meir and her advisors plan their response. Avner Kaufman (Eric Bana), one of Meir's former bodyguards, is asked to lead a hand-picked team of undercover operatives on a mission to assassinate the Palestinian leaders who planned the attack.

In the middle section, Avner goes to Europe, meets the members of his team, and begins to hunt down and eliminate his targets. Like most of the characters in *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*, the members of Avner's team all seem to come from Central Casting – the belligerent Jew (Daniel Craig), the timid Jew (Mathieu Kassovitz), the effete Jew (Hanns Zischler), and the Jew whose main job is to kvetch (Ciaran Hinds). They eat the big dinners Avner prepares for them (he's a Sabra, so of course his credentials include time spent working in the kitchen on his kibbutz) and talk Talmud, but we never really know who they are or what motivates them as individuals. They come together in scenic cities like Paris and Rome, plant bombs, and move on. Palestinians die one after another, with every scene cynically constructed to imperil innocent bystanders. Then the team assembles in Athens, where the action moves from mechanical through improbable to a truly tasteless finale which crosscuts the athletes' last moments in Munich's Fürstenfeldbruck airport with Avner banging away at his wife Dafna one year later in Brooklyn.

At the start of Act Three, Avner and his team are in a "safe house" in Athens when a group of Palestinians arrive unexpectedly, supposedly assigned to the same location. The clever Jews quickly make-up new identities (I'm German, says one. I'm Basque, says another), and they all pass a tense night together. But the next day, when their bomb fails, one of the Jews bypasses all of the bodyguards (who are last night's roommates, of course), runs into the hotel, and single-handedly throws a grenade at the Athens target.

The Palestinians and their KGB minders don't even notice him let alone try to stop him, but after the ensuing firefight the Jews become marked men. Three are quickly disposed of, making Avner both hunted and haunted.

Avner flies to Israel, where everyone treats him like a hero, but he quickly turns his back on them and heads to Brooklyn. Why? In Act Two, Avner moved Dafna to Brooklyn in order to facilitate secret visits, although there's no indication in the film that he ever actually makes any visits. We're expected to believe that no one asked any questions when Dafna left Israel, and furthermore the Mossad doesn't know where she is? But let's accept Dafna's move to Brooklyn. Does Avner leave her there in Act Three, even after he knows he's become a terrorist target? Ridiculous!

Dafna is in Brooklyn for only one reason: Spielberg and his primary collaborator, playwright Tony Kushner, know exactly where they want their film to end, and they're determined to get there by any means necessary. And so we last see Avner on a beautiful fall day, walking home through a park in Brooklyn, with the ill-fated Twin Towers as a backdrop. Invoking September 11, 2001 in the context of events deliberately set between September 1972 and September 1973 has an obvious political purpose for Spielberg and Kushner. What they're really interested in is Western response to global terrorism, vaguely equating ongoing events in West Bank/Gaza with the current war in Iraq. The fact that their whole third act makes absolutely no sense doesn't seem to bother them. Why should plot and character matter to a film driven by politics?

SO WHAT ABOUT "THE BIG ISSUES"?

MUNICH is controversial insofar as it attempts to raise "big issues." Criticism from within the Jewish community has typically hit on two points: the basic facts presented in MUNICH are wrong; and making Palestinian and Israeli acts structurally equivalent is immoral. Many critics and columnists have already debated about these points, and I have nothing new to add. For me, the historical distortion in MUNICH is much more fundamental. As JUF Executive Vice President Michael Kotzin says in his own eloquent article: [For Spielberg, the case for Israel is just about exclusively linked to Jewish suffering in the Holocaust and the need for a homeland in light of that historic trauma.](#)"

In MUNICH, politics begins to corrode the plot in the Athens "safe house." The improbable "safe house" scenes have been constructed solely so that Avner can have a soulful stairway conversation with his Palestinian counterpart, Ali (Omar Metwally). Convinced that he's talking to a German radical, Ali tells Avner that Jews are manipulating European guilt about the Holocaust: "My father never gassed anybody!" For Ali, Israel is a "European country" whose citizens are primarily Holocaust survivors and their descendants. For Ali, Israel has no claim to Middle Eastern soil.

Ali's speech resonates. When Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said: "If you [Westerners] have burned the Jews, why don't you give a piece of Europe, the United States, Canada or Alaska to Israel... if you have committed this huge crime, why should the innocent nation of Palestine pay for this crime?," good people everywhere decried his denial of the Holocaust while tacitly accepting his basic premise.

But the Jewish citizens of Israel come from many lands, and the largest percent of them actually come from Middle Eastern families. Jews were stripped of possessions, exiled, and sometimes even murdered in almost every one of the Islamic countries both during and immediately after the horrific events in Europe. Spielberg and Kushner probably know this, but they obviously don't care. They implicitly endorse Ali's argument by making their hero and all of his associates Ashkenazi. Furthermore, they give Avner's mother a long speech in which she explicitly glorifies his role as the family avenger: "You are the one we [the Holocaust victims] all prayed for." So what disturbs me most about MUNICH, political speaking, is the fact that Spielberg misrepresents the real Israel (a multicultural, multiracial democracy with a huge Mizrahi component), choosing instead to depict dangerous distortions.

Those of us lucky enough to have seen the documentary THE LAST JEWS OF BAGHDAD at Spertus last year already know how many other stories cry out to be told. So do readers of Roya Hakakian's memoir JOURNEY FROM THE LAND OF NO. According to Hakakian, within days after the Shah left Tehran in

1979, swastikas were already visible on the walls of her neighborhood along with the graffiti message: "Johouds [dirty Jews] Get Lost!" Mizrahi history is also reflected in recent films such as THE RINGWORM CHILDREN and TURN LEFT AT THE END OF THE WORLD, both of which were shown as part of last year's Israel Film Festival series.

Almost 1 million Jews from Islamic countries immigrated to Israel between 1948 and 2001, many of them penniless refugees airlifted in from cosmopolitan capitals. Twelve years ago, Spielberg made [SCHINDLER'S LIST](#), a film so powerful that Holocaust denial finally became disreputable, so it's somehow appropriate that Spielberg, however inadvertently, should be the director to close this loop a decade later. Worse even than forgetting the Holocaust is allowing our enemies to use it as a weapon against us.

SO WHAT ABOUT THE OSCARS?

Like so many other aspects of our infotainment-driven world, the Oscars have long since become part of the "culture wars," and the artistic merits of a film seem to matter less now than the political buzz which surrounds it. Not one of my own candidates for best film of 2005 was nominated on January 31, and when the winners are finally announced on March 5, there's only one person I know I'll be rooting for, namely Rachel Weisz, the radiant star of THE CONSTANT GARDNER. I suspect that the people who nominated MUNICH for so many awards did so because they wanted to make a statement about "Bush's War" on Iraq. These are likely the same people who believe that the Palestinian cause is not fairly represented in the American media, and that MUNICH is one appropriate corrective. (Note that they also nominated PARADISE NOW "from Palestine" for Best Foreign Language Film.)

COMING ATTRACTIONS

I have one final problem with MUNICH: by ending their film sometime in September 1973, Spielberg and Kushner have deliberately ignored what actually happened next, namely the attack on Israel that began on Oct. 6, 1973. The Broadway hit [GOLDA'S BALCONY](#), originally scheduled to open this month, has been pushed back, so I'll have more to say about the Yom Kippur War come June. I will also have more to say about PARADISE NOW in April, once it is available to all on DVD.

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