What a wonderful dictator!

(Left to right) A scene from “My Fuehrer,” Charlie Chaplin in “The Great Dictator” and a poster of the film “Downfall.”
Dani Levy's nauseating new film 'My Fuehrer: The Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler' preaches to the audience to let bygones be bygones, to be forgiving, to lighten up.

By Zohar Shavit

Last week, at a movie theater in downtown Frankfurt, I saw Adolf Hitler reborn as a pathetic character that evokes sympathy and compassion. This happened in "My Fuehrer: The Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler," a film produced by the German Jewish director Dani Levy. "My Fuehrer" is set in the twilight years of the Third Reich. Hitler is brought together with a Jew named Adolf Gruenbaum, an actor and drama professor plucked from Sachsenhausen concentration camp by Josef Goebbels, in an attempt to revive the feelings of the other Adolf and to help him recapture the joys of leadership and hypnotic hype.

In its first two weeks in theaters, "My Fuehrer" has already attracted half-a-million moviegoers, and with all the storm that has kicked up, it has been accepted as legitimate among the German elite. "My Fuehrer" is one of several recent movies that tell the story of Germany's past from the perspective of the Nazis as detached from the Germans who have been fooled into thinking the Nazis are victims of Hitler, who was stripped of his German-ness and portrayed as "different," physically and mentally: small, dark, shrill and demonic.

Going easy on Nazis

Levy's film adds another layer, particularly extreme, to this master-narrative. Now that the Germans are victims of Hitler and Nazism, and even the Nazis are victims of Nazism, "My Fuehrer" proceeds to turn Hitler into a victim of Nazism. Perhaps because it bills itself as a satire, "My Fuehrer" presents the Germans as ridiculous, amusing and more forehead-slapstick - a chain of comic accidents, that stupidity rather than wickedness, that creates empathy. Levy is not the first to show the "comic" side of the Nazis. "Life is Beautiful." The allusion to "The Great Dictator" does not save this film from disgrace because it contains no condemnation of Nazism and its horrors. On the contrary, it perpetuates the German denial of responsibility for the Holocaust.

The climax of "The Great Dictator" is Hitler as a golem. The Nazis need Gruenbaum's services because he, a Jew, is the only one who can recreate the Fuehrer. He does a good job of it. He touches all the right chords in Hitler's sensitive soul in order to resurrect the great master of rhetoric and to try to get the crowds roaring again. In the final scene of the movie, Hitler loses his voice and is unable to address the audience that fills the square where he was to give his feisty motivational speech in his stead. The Jewish Adolf, of course - the mirror image of the German Adolf. Hitler is born anew here as a kind of golem, a lump of clay, whose creation is inspired by the Jews and who comes to life at the podium with him. Standing before the masses, he delivers this Nazi oratory with great fervor.

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Hitler as a golem

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even skimmed the surface – if not for all this, one could view Dani Levy’s film as a cultural accident.

What was Levy thinking when he made this film? Did he really believe that by probing the “psychology” of his character he could create another masterpiece like “The Great Dictator”? Or maybe he just wanted to align himself with the German narrative and pander to it. One way or another, this nauseating film should never have seen the light of day.

Asked about his famous speech at St. Paul’s Church, German novelist Martin Walser told a Newsweek interviewer that no one could dictate to the Germans how to deal with the shame of their country. “My Fuehrer” is a warning as well as tangible proof that the victims of the Germans not only have the right, but the duty, to intervene in how the Germans choose to tell themselves about their past. If not, that repulsive past is liable to sink into the depths of oblivion and be wiped out of human memory as if it never happened.

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