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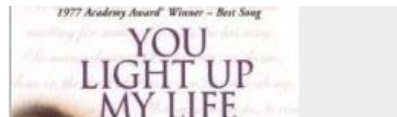
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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
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Cannes 2009 Day Eight: Jews Fighting Back, Jews In Love, Singing Nuns and Dour Germans

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If it wasn't taking so long to upload my video clips, you could already be watching my interview with documentary filmmaker Anne Aghion about the gachacha trials in Rwanda. Look for it Thursday (I hope). Right now, here are the reviews of today's films.

INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS *** 1/2 (OUT OF FOUR) -- At this stage of the festival, a movie has to be really good just to keep you awake. Well, Quentin Tarantino kept me awake from 8:30 in the morning till 11:00 (about two and a half

hours) with his WW II B movie *Inglourious Basterds*. It begins with two gripping introductions: one is a terrific set piece in a French country home where a farmer and his three beautiful daughters are sheltering Jews who hide under the floorboards when the Nazis show up for another inspection. The other introduction is of the Nazi leading that inspection and it's journeyman actor Christoph Waltz who is absolutely sensational as Col. Hans Landa, one of the wittiest, smartest and most compelling villains ever. Waltz absolutely steals a film peopled with strong actors like rising British star Michael Fassbender, Daniel Bruhl, Maggie Cheung, and Til Schweiger. Waltz can make offering a glass of milk seem dripping with menace and when he shouts with glee, "I have a Bingo!" it's funny enough to become a catch phrase.

Divided into chapters, the movie is a revenge fantasy where a band of Jews head into occupied France and kick some ass in the most violent, frightening way possible. Fun set pieces abound: that scene in the country farm house, an extended showdown in a German bar, the amusingly cruel torture of Nazi prisoners by the Basterds, and a finale in a movie house. In fact, movie jokes are a running gag in the film, with one character a former movie critic and a constant emphasis on how movies can change the world. It's definitely Tarantino, including elaborate and spot-on dialogue

Bettye LaVette

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that goes on and on and circles back to the heart of things just when you think he's lost his way and a Mexican stand-off or two. But to my taste, the period setting has kept Tarantino in check a bit; it's his most disciplined film in a while and the combination of a great score, and resolutely low-key action pay offs keeps the B movie flavor consistent throughout. So a great new actor (I'm telling you, Waltz is amazing), loads of fun -- I expected very strong applause and thought, "Gee, *Une Prophete* is gonna have a run for its money at least from critics." And then the applause was mild, polite and quickly over. Throughout the rest of the day, it became clear I was in a distinct minority on this one.

EYES WIDE OPEN *** -- This Israeli film is about an Orthodox Jew living in Jerusalem, a butcher who has just reopened the meat store after his father's death. He's got a dutiful wife, a couple of kids and the deep respect of his community. Until, that is, he takes in a young Orthodox Jew who seems lost and adrift. The younger man quickly proves useful in the store but word filters back from other communities that he is bad news, a sinner. And what is his sin? One man intriguingly describes the man as having performed too many mitzvahs (good deeds). The simple truth is that the man is gay and was in love with another man who has rejected him and yearns to follow a respectable path. You can see where this is headed, I assume. It's delivered with restraint and respect and perhaps a little fear for the tightly knit, stifling world of the Orthodox Jews. There is safety in such uniformity, such closeness but you pay a very heavy price. Their burgeoning love is contrasted with the scandalous neighbor who continues to court a young woman who loves him even though she's been promised by her father to another. The community is relentless, even violent in destroying this love. And we realize by implication how utterly beyond the pale the love of these two men would be if it were known. A solid, well-told tale. Just don't expect a happy ending.

SISTER SMILE ** -- This French film is the latest to tackle the live of The Singing Nun, the Belgian one-hit wonder novelty act of sorts who had a massive hit single with "Dominique." Debbie Reynolds played her in a film in the Sixties, but needless to say it whitewashed the real story. The real Singing Nun was apparently a lesbian who at first struggled with her sexuality, rebelled against the Church, left her order and even the Church, and even wrote a song celebrating the Pill. That didn't go down to well at the Vatican, I imagine. A very conventional, TV movie sort of film, this movie could be shown on TV without any cuts, despite a sensationalistic story that has already been at least one other feature film, a campy Off-Broadway play and a musical. Cecelia de France is winning as Jeanine Deckers, the Singing Nun aka Sister Smile. She plays her from high school (where every girl in sight seems to have had a crush on her) to her death, which in this version is preceded by the climax of her positive personal acceptance of being gay. In a gesture typical of the film's moderate tone, we see her strip down to her bra to seduce a man (after leaving her order, mind you) but when she finds true love with a woman it's depicted only with a chaste clasping of the hands and a quick kiss on the knuckles. A bit tame, but intriguing almost despite itself. Gay audiences -- especially lesbians -- should find the story fascinating.

THE WHITE RIBBON * 1/2 -- The dour, austere Michael Haneke manages to out-bleak himself with this tale set right before the onset of WW I. In it, a small town is beset by a string of disturbing crimes, including a suicide, the torture of a mentally challenged boy and more. Gee, could it have anything to do with the local kids who travel in a pack, always appearing on the scene of misery and asking with the utmost concern if they can help? And might that have something to do with the fact that their fathers are without exception unbelievably sadistic and cruel? When they're not raping their children, they're beating them. (That's not an exaggeration.) That's the set-up, the plot and the resolution of the film which no more explains WW II (they behaved evilly and voted in Hitler because their parents were such shits?) than it explains what the heck it was trying to illuminate beyond the obvious fact that beating your kids is both wrong and perhaps damaging. People threw a fuss over the Lars Von Trier film because they found it disturbing, which is like seeing a John Waters film and complaining it was in poor taste. And Von Trier's film was a fantasy with a stylized, over-the-top tone that kept the cruelty at a theatrical, unreal level. The nastiness on display in this film, in contrast, is deadly real. Haneke doesn't need to justify his film to me but it would have been helpful if he'd justified it to its characters and given them something, anything, an insight perhaps, to hold onto when all he gives them is an open palm slapping them across the face.

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It remains a quiet fest in the market and late at night but definitely exciting and vibrant when it comes to the new films screening in and out of Competition.



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Coming to Cannes is usually a no-brainer. But for film-maker Anne Aghion, accepting an invitation to bring her documentary *My Neighbor, My Killer* was a genuine risk.



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What I want to show in my film is the abuse of power; the police are like god. They can butcher people. I don't expect people to like the film, but I want them to think about it after they go to bed.

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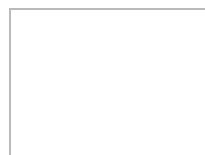
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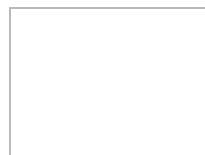
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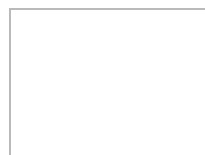
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Sounds pretty fun over there.

Someone ought to make a movie about a nun kicking ass.

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