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Erie glimpse of Nazi attitude on human dignity

Infamous Nazi holocaust doctor explored in stunning thriller

SAN FRANCISCO, November 28, 2008 – Newly available in America, an award-winning film about Holocaust “angel of death” doctor Josef Mengele – one of the most-wanted Nazi war criminals – focuses on a hypothetical fictional trial in which he comes out of “hiding” after 30 years to tell his story to the world.

“After the Truth” earned multiple film awards and sparked international controversy in 1999 when it was first released in Germany. Its star, Götz George (who plays Dr. Josef Mengele) won best-actor nomination for the prestigious European Film Award. He won Best Actor honors at the 2000 Brussels International Film Festival, where “After the Truth” was also nominated as Best European Feature. After its German theatrical run, the film was featured at over 30 festivals around the world, including the Jewish film festivals of Toronto, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and Hong Kong.

The film is now distributed in the U.S. exclusively through Ignatius Press. The DVD comes with a 16-page booklet written by the film’s American screenwriters, Christopher and Kathleen Riley, of Los Angeles, and presents additional insight into the film and the life of Josef Mengele.

Who was Josef Mengele?

An ambitious medical officer of the German SS, Mengele was strategically placed at the Auschwitz extermination camp to carry out “selections” and human experiments during the final years of World War II. He became known as the “angel of death” for two reasons.

First, Mengele appeared at more inmate selections than any other camp doctor – meeting trains as they arrived at the camp and personally selecting up to 400,000 men, women and children (most of them, Jews) for immediate death in the camp’s gas chambers. Second, he
performed horrific medical experiments on inmates – many of them twins or children. Sewing hunchbacks together, performing castrations without anesthetic, intentionally infecting “patients” with typhus, and even dissecting live infants – were among the many “studies” he conducted. Mengele’s rationale was that these people were doomed to death upon arrival, and forthcoming medical insights might benefit others.

The Rileys created the script originally in English. When German producer, Werner Koenig, saw the screenplay in 1997, he immediately began the two-year process of bringing the Riley’s story to screen. The film gains further authenticity by virtue of having been filmed in German by an all-German cast and crew on the streets of Berlin and on the sound stage of the historic Babelsberg Studios in Potsdam.

"We wrote this screenplay to explore not only what happened in the Nazi Holocaust, but how it happened," says screenplay co-writer Christopher Riley. "We saw that the Nazis defined certain groups of people -- Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, gypsies, homosexuals -- as not fully human. We also saw that German medicine embraced the idea that those considered less than human could be killed. Their participation played a significant role in the development of the Nazi killing machine."

Though Mengele became a fugitive and wasn’t found until after his death in Brazil in 1979, “After the Truth” broke a decades-old taboo in Germany of allowing one of the most hated of Nazi figures to “speak” on-screen. In the film, Mengele is portrayed as presenting his defense at trial, offering a haunting explanation for the horrors of Auschwitz.

During production, the film ran low on funding. So Mr. George, whose father was once an actor in Nazi propaganda films, invested a half-million dollars of his own money to see “After the Truth” to completion.

**Rationale for “experimentation” and termination**

The movement in German medicine toward social Darwinism actually got started during the 19th century. At that time, Jews were already seen as “parasites” and “cholera germs” whom physicians should perhaps sterilize.¹ By 1920, Germans Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche had written a book, *The Permission to Destroy Life Not Worth Living*, that charted the course for national medical policy over the next tragic quarter-century.

And so it went – in order to protect the health of larger society in Germany, it was the duty of doctors to kill the mentally ill. Then the plan was handily extended to include the disabled, the deformed, the retarded, the chronically ill, or anyone who required care and who wasn’t able to contribute to the good of the state.

**High praise for “Truth”**

David Magidson, artistic director of the Detroit Jewish Film Festival, wrote, “In this masterful German film we see the Holocaust recalled from Mengele’s point of view, as well as the testimony of those who witnessed his “choosing” of hundreds of thousands for death or medical experimentation. *This*[film] *will change your life.*”

¹ James T. Burchaell. *Di Buben Sind Unser Ungluck!*
The film has also earned several other admirable endorsements:

“Utterly engrossing, provocative and impeccably acted.”
—Detroit Free Press

“Courageous and smart. High octane.”
—Rolling Stone

“A gripping and often surprising moving slice of entertainment.”
—Variety

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San Francisco-based Ignatius Press, founded in 1978, is one of the largest Catholic publishers in the world. Ignatius Press is the primary English-language publisher of Pope Benedict XVI. Dedicated to publishing and distributing information on the Catholic faith, Ignatius Press publishes over 40 books each year (with over 1,800 titles in print), and produces and licenses many fine films for distribution in North America. Its author-roster includes some of the foremost names in the Catholic Church. Ignatius Press is also the publisher of Catholic World Report and Homiletic & Pastoral Review magazines. [www.ignatius.com](http://www.ignatius.com)
Christopher and Kathleen Riley are screenwriters whose first film, “After the Truth”, a multiple-award-winning German language courtroom thriller, sparked international controversy in 1999 when it was released in Germany. The film earned its star, Goetz George, a best actor nomination for the prestigious European Film Award.

The husband-wife team wrote “25 to Life”, a dramatic thriller for director Jon Turteltaub's Junction Entertainment and Touchstone Pictures, and “The Other White House”, a political thriller for Sean Connery’s Fountainbridge Films and Intermedia. They adapted the nonfiction book, Actual Innocence by Barry Scheck, Peter Neufeld and Jim Dwyer, for Mandalay Television Pictures and the Fox television network, and they wrote “Aces”, an action adventure, for producer Robert Cort and Paramount Pictures.

The Rileys have taught for the acclaimed Act One Writing Program in Hollywood since its inception, and Christopher served as the program's director from 2005 to 2008.

Christopher is the author of the standard-setting screenwriting book, The Hollywood Standard, based on his years managing the script processing department at Warner Bros. He divides his time between writing in Los Angeles and teaching at John Paul the Great Catholic University in San Diego.

Kathleen is the co-founder of We Can, Pediatric Brain Tumor Network, an organization that provides information and an emotional lifeline to families whose children have been diagnosed with brain tumors. In addition to writing, she currently serves as We Can's executive director.

The Rileys live in Los Angeles.
“After the Truth”

Screenwriters: Christopher and Kathleen Riley
U.S. exclusive distributor: Ignatius Press
Release Date in U.S.: November 2008
Length: 120 minutes – DVD
(with 16-page booklet containing information about the film, the life and times of Mengele, and discussion questions)

Price: $24.95
ISBN: 978-1-58617-323-4
Order: www.ignatius.com
1-800-651-1531

Description:

This powerful, award-winning German film tells the story of one of the greatest challenges the legal system has ever faced. Dr. Josef Mengele, the infamous “angel of death” in Auschwitz, and one of the most wanted Nazi war criminals, turns himself in after 30 years in hiding to tell his “truth” to the world.

*After the Truth* presents Mengele’s hypothetical trial, which forces viewers to review his guilt, especially in the context of the wider attitudes toward the dignity of human life in German society. The responsibility of people’s sense of right and wrong is mirrored in the film by attorney Peter Rohm – Mengele’s defender – whose idealistic belief in the legal system conflicts heavily with his emotional resistance to defending Mengele. The viewer is presented with Mengele the man – flesh and blood – and must hear him out as he quite emotionally yet rationally states the reasons for his work and his supposed “mercy” that he imposed on his “patients”.

The viewer is faced with the ironic comparison between Mengele’s “reasoning” and that which is so rampant today on similar “mercy” decisions.

The DVD also contains an audio commentary track with screenwriters Christopher and Kathleen Riley.

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Broadcast Interview Questions

For

Christopher and Kathleen Riley
Screenwriters

“After The Truth” film

1. How did you come to write the screenplay for a film on Nazi death-camp doctor, Josef Mengele?

2. What was the reaction in Germany when the film was first released there?

3. How has it been received by Jewish audiences around the world?

4. Do you see a correlation between Mengele’s actions as the “angel of death” and the progressing “norms” and attitudes about the dignity of human life today?

5. What had been happening in the German medical movement prior to World War II which produced a “monster” physician such as Mengele?

6. How has your research for writing this screenplay affected you? And what can you say about our society and any likeness it has to the time of Mengele?