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ANATOMY OF EVIL/ Movie fills in last piece of puzzle, producer says

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"Synonymous with evil."

That's what Peter Sussman, executive producer of a two-part CBS movie about Hitler's pre-World War II years, says of his infamous subject during a conference call. "It's probably just about the worst name in our entire vocabulary."

Ultimately, Hitler managed to be more than the epitome of evil, though. He surpassed it. No language is equipped to describe such treachery. Evil would probably be mortified if you called it Hitler. It would cry.

But "Hitler: The Rise of Evil," starring Robert Carlyle ("The Full Monty"), doesn't concern itself much with the outcome of history's most odious individual.

The most gruesome moments are tacked on at the end as a group of stills accompanied by statistical text.

The miniseries concentrates instead on the years leading up to Hitler's chancellorship, including his awkward childhood in Austria, his attempt to become an artist, his stint as a medal-seeking corporal in the German army during World War I, and the development of his public and political persona. Evil-in-training.

It's an area Sussman felt had been neglected, despite the significant attention that has been paid to the Holocaust and to Hitler himself in previous dramatic and documentary films.

"We saw it as sort of this giant jigsaw puzzle where every piece of the puzzle had been put in place except one," he says.

"Nobody had gone back and said 'Wait a minute. How did this guy even get into this position?' "

The project was criticized for focusing on those early years. Some interpreted it as a marketing tool to attract younger audiences.

Having seen the film, Jewish groups have since reversed their position, but many initially protested a potentially sympathetic portrayal of Hitler. They suggested that by exploring his adolescence and early manhood, the movie might offer excuses for his agenda of hate.

The filmmakers had a solid sense of responsibility, however. So much so that when the film wrapped they incinerated every Nazi prop they had manufactured, some 400 items, according to Sussman.

Faced with the difficult task of being Hitler, Carlyle also considered the possible consequences of playing the role. "I felt kinda confident within myself that no one would see that there was any flashiness in there or any kind of posturing to try and win over any kind of support . . . to make this guy in any way glamorous, in any way sympathetic," he says through a heavy Scottish brogue, far different from the British accent he adopts for his character.

"You can't deny he was a human being, you know. He walked around and spoke," he says. "But I don't think it humanizes him."

Neither does it present cause-and-effect diagrams to directly link events in his upbringing to his insatiable quest for dominance. Approved for accuracy by historians Cornelius Schnauber and Charles S. Maier, what it does accomplish, almost peripherally, is a series of thought-provoking "what if" scenarios.

What if Hitler had been killed in combat during World War I? What if he had been fatally shot instead of merely wounded during a failed uprising against the German government?

What if Ernst Hanfstaengl (Liev Schreiber, "Sum of All Fears") hadn't encouraged him to market his message to the masses? What if Helene Hanfstaengl (Juliana Margulies, "ER") hadn't stopped him from committing suicide? What if she hadn't dissuaded him from a hunger strike?

What if journalist Fritz Gerlich (Matthew Modine, "Married to the Mob") hadn't been the only one to openly defy him? What if even one high-ranking government official had resisted his bullying tactics?

So many possibilities.

Moreover, the film positions Hitler as a somewhat unoriginal thinker - someone who appropriated his slogans, ideals and symbol from others.

"We certainly meant to portray him as this sort of wayward not very talented individual who, through incredible luck and being opportunistic at the right point, managed to manipulate the world in front of him to advance a career," says Sussman.

Simply reiterating that Hitler was evil wasn't the intent. As a result, the film is more intellectually stimulating than emotionally stirring.

But Sussman says the character would have "become cartoony had we chosen to aggressively put the evil front and center right between people's eyes."

"Sometimes less is more," he says.

TO VIEW

8 p.m. Sunday and Tuesday on CBS