

# Atom Egoyan's *Remember*: A Nazi criminal hunted...

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*Directed by Atom Egoyan; screenplay by Benjamin August*

*Remember* is the latest film by veteran Canadian director Atom Egoyan (born 1960). It is a psychological drama centering on two octogenarian survivors of Auschwitz living in a retirement home in Detroit who set about to track down and kill their former *blockfuhrer* (SS block leader/guard).

Christopher Plummer plays Zev Guttman, a man pushing 90 who has recently lost his beloved wife. Friend and fellow retirement home resident Max Rosenbaum (Martin Landau) reminds Zev they once made a pact to kill the Nazi guard Otto Wallisch, who murdered both their families. Zev is able-bodied but suffers from symptoms of dementia, whereas Max has a sharp mind but is confined to a wheelchair.

Max masterminds the project, which involves Zev journeying across the US and Canada to track down Wallisch, who emigrated to North America under the name “Rudy Kurlander.” Max outlines the details of the operation in a letter that Zev must consult each time he grows disoriented.

After purchasing a handgun, Zev embarks on the dangerous mission to locate the right Kurlander—out of four possibilities. Traveling by bus and taxi, the elderly man stops at the home of the first Rudy Kurlander (Bruno Ganz), who served under German Field Marshal Rommel in North Africa, and, therefore, was not a guard at Auschwitz.

The second Kurlander is a dying homosexual man who himself was a camp inmate. The third is deceased, but Zev learns from his son John (Dean Morris)—a reactionary state trooper who has absorbed his father’s filthy views—that this Kurlander would have been too young to be a concentration camp guard. In John’s bleak, Nazi memorabilia-filled home, Zev has to fight for his life.

The alarming denouement of *Remember* occurs during Zev’s last stop, a nightmarish ordeal that uncovers an awful secret buried in the protagonist’s damaged memory.

The filmmakers should be given credit for eliciting captivating performances from all the elderly actors, in both leading and supporting roles, who impart to the movie genuine substance and human appeal. Plummer is especially

outstanding. In showcasing these actors’ extraordinary gifts, Egoyan—at least by implication—stresses the continued worth and vitality of the aging portion of the population, as opposed to the official view that it is so much dead weight.

More significantly, the pursuit of Nazis who have escaped prosecution for their crimes is an entirely praiseworthy subject and could be the means of shedding further light on a terrible chapter of modern history.

Unfortunately, Egoyan steers clear of all the most pressing, crucial issues.

With only very limited artistic success, the filmmaker has been directing independent feature films for more than two decades, including *Exotica*, 1994; *The Sweet Hereafter*, 1997; *Felicia’s Journey*, 1999; *Ararat*, 2002; *Adoration*, 2009; *Chloe*, 2009; and *Devil’s Knot*, 2013.

We commented in 2009 that Egoyan’s concerns “about history, technology and family life, are not advanced or worked through forcefully, and the results are generally schematic, distant and dramatically contrived.

“The overall effect is rather provincial: a report given by someone not directly involved in great events or deeply committed to anything, aimed at an audience of people concentrated on secondary or tertiary matters (more bluntly, their own selves).”

Egoyan’s best film to date by far is *Devil’s Knot*, an adept and straightforward dramatization of the trial of the West Memphis Three, teenagers who were falsely convicted of killing three young boys during a Satanic cult hysteria, and subsequently sentenced to death.

Unfortunately, *Remember*, like Egoyan’s *Ararat*, about the Armenian genocide, is neither satisfying dramatically nor historically insightful. It covers the same artistic-intellectual ground as the rest of his weaker films, marred as they are by relatively pointless, self-conscious and often unconvincing psychological “complexities.”

In *Remember*, the treatment of escaped Nazi criminals becomes merely a vehicle for dramatizing, without much serious content, the problem of suppressed memory. The filmmakers choose not to concern themselves with the

relationship between postwar West German and American authorities and many of these criminals, including the fact that scores of “former” fascists were integrated into German society or picked up by the CIA and the US military.

In Germany, this reality is still an open wound. The WSWs coverage of the recent Berlin film festival, in a review of a new adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, noted, for example, that “the Gestapo officer Karl Josef Silberbauer, who arrested the Frank family, was able to continue to work in his area of expertise after the war. Now under a ‘democratic’ flag. He worked for the notorious Gehlen organisation (named after Wehrmacht general Reinhard Gehlen, one of the leading figures in German intelligence during World War II), the West German spy agency set up by the CIA in 1946 to spy on the USSR and Eastern Europe.”

Helping to lend the film its relatively pallid character is its largely bare-bones and far-fetched script.

The screenplay was written by novice Benjamin August (born 1979), whose major previous credential was as casting director for the stunt/dare reality television show *Fear Factor*.

In an interview, August explained his motivations: “My first thought was I want to write a movie that stars older actors. I feel that some of the greatest living actors are relegated to smaller roles and don’t get to shine the way they used to.” So far, so good.

August went on to explain that he had read reports estimating there might be hundreds of Nazi war criminals still alive in their 80s or 90s. He continued: “I was wondering what kind of lives they were living; were they living in fear? Looking over their shoulder every day? Were they going to bed at night with a smile on their face that they got away from it? Most importantly, did their families know about it—and what would it take to get the truth out?”

**The reader needs to be alerted: do not read any further if learning the ending of *Remember* is a matter of concern to you!**

In August-Egoyan’s film, the ability of Nazi criminals to hide their past from “their families” does indeed take center stage, but in an almost entirely gimmicky, contrived manner.

The film’s major, surprising twist—a Nazi-hunter in the early stages of Alzheimer’s turns out to be the object of his own hunt—makes use of dementia as a plot device in a questionable and somewhat unsavory manner.

August’s unserious effort jibes with Egoyan’s stated postmodern hostility to the “grand narrative.” The filmmaker has argued in past interviews that “small gestures” are more telling than “broad clinical gestures.” More recently, he said he was interested in “how people form a reality when there’s no explanation.” In this regard,

*Remember* settles for small (peculiar) gestures without (believable) explanations.

The film’s shocking finale does further harm to its cohesiveness, already on life support. *Remember* depends on an unlikely set of circumstances whose purpose is principally to stun, rather than enlighten the viewer.

After all, Plummer’s “Zev” has been presented throughout as a lovely “old gent,” with whom one sympathizes as a Holocaust survivor—until the film’s last moments when the ghastly truth emerges. Only in the scene in which Plummer’s character guns down John Kurlander and his vicious dog does the film hint he might be capable of extreme violence. But this is hardly a compelling indicator of an inner monster.

Nazism was a political movement, the counter-revolutionary response of German capitalism to the threat of social revolution. The film’s trick ending avoids any exploration of the fascist political and social outlook in favor of merely endeavoring to wipe the smile off the face of someone who has gotten “away with it,” as August states, as though such people were housebreakers or bank robbers.

Other filmmakers have treated this matter more seriously. For example, Orson Welles explores the Nazi psyche and worldview, including its vicious anti-communism, in his 1946 movie *The Stranger*. Welles plays an escaped Nazi who hides in a sleepy New England enclave living amongst its respected citizens. When the snake sheds his skin, a vile, cunning creature is dragged into the light of day. The fact that this is an immediate postwar film when Nazism was fresh in the minds of millions does not excuse Egoyan for toying with history today. Moreover, fascism is once again rearing its beastly head.



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