

Christoph Waltz's *Georgetown*: One small, murderous liar in a sea of much bigger, murderous liars

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19 June 2021

Directed by Christoph Waltz; written by David Auburn

“As for being a mass killer, does not the world encourage it? Is it not building weapons of destruction for the sole purpose of mass killing? Has it not blown unsuspecting women and little children to pieces, and done it very scientifically? As a mass killer, I am an amateur by comparison.” – *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), directed by and starring Charlie Chaplin

Georgetown is an intriguing and intelligently made film by Austrian-German actor Christoph Waltz now available for streaming. It is a fictionalized account of the exploits in Washington D.C. of one Albrecht Gero Muth, who murdered his wife, Viola Herms Drath, more than 40 years his senior, in August 2011.

German-born Muth attempted, with some initial success, to scale the political and diplomatic ladder in Washington in the 1990s and beyond, eventually hosting parties attended by Pierre Salinger, Dick Cheney, Antonin Scalia and others.

According to Franklin Foer's 2012 *New York Times Magazine* article “The Worst Marriage in Georgetown,” which inspired Waltz's film, Muth formed the “Eminent Persons Group” in 1999, ostensibly aimed at bringing together “a collection of prestigious international thinkers to advise the U.N. secretary general. Among others, Muth enlisted the Pakistani cricket star (and now leading presidential candidate [actually a candidate for prime minister, a position he now holds]) Imran Khan and former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. A co-chairman of the group was former Prime Minister Michel Rocard of France. [Billionaire] George Soros provided seed money.”

Waltz and screenwriter David Auburn have changed the names of Muth, Drath and a few more individuals, permitting them to treat the various incidents and relationships more flexibly, but the central core of the actual events remains. The title, *Georgetown*, refers to the affluent, historic Washington neighborhood and commercial district, home to many influential politicians and lobbyists, as well as the location of numerous embassies.

Waltz's film shifts backward and forward in time. In the opening scenes, 91-year-old Elsa Breht (Vanessa Redgrave) meets her death, apparently through an accident at the Georgetown residence she shares with her much younger husband, Ulrich Mott (Waltz). Homicide detectives are polite but obviously interested in Mott's whereabouts at the time of Breht's demise.

Georgetown then recounts how the pair met. Mott is a fast-talking, social-climbing German émigré who squeezes his way into Washington society in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At a White House Correspondents Dinner, which he attends on stolen credentials,

he makes himself known to Breht, a much older, German-born journalist and socialite. When Mott—at the time an intern giving guided tours of the Capitol building—asks Elsa to lunch, she is amused and flattered by his effrontery but informs or reminds him she is married.

When Elsa's husband dies, sure enough Mott pops up again in her life, quite forcefully. He makes himself indispensable to the older woman. Her daughter, Amanda (Annette Bening), is off to Boston to take a tenured position at Harvard University, leaving her mother alone and vulnerable. Later, when Mott announces his engagement to Elsa, Amanda is clearly appalled.

After their marriage, Mott continues being what Elsa a little contemptuously refers to as “the perfect butler.” He waits on her hand and foot. “Is that all you want to be?” she asks him provocatively. Set into motion, Mott begins his political-diplomatic ascendancy. He first offers his services to a Soviet diplomat and former deputy foreign minister, Vladimir Petrovsky, as the latter's “Washington eyes and ears.”

Mott's social “Ponzi scheme,” as one of his lawyers will later term it, leads him through a process of careful name-dropping and buttering up, from one high-ranking individual to the next. He founds his Eminent Persons Group (EPG), first drawing in Nebraska Republican Senator (and future Secretary of Defense under Obama) Chuck Hagel (Richard Blackburn), who, in turn, makes it possible for him to grab the attention of former French Prime Minister (and “far leftist” in 1968) Michel Rocard (Jean Pearson), then a member of the European Parliament and active in European Union affairs.

Eventually, at the pinnacle of his success, Mott comes to the attention of Soros and McNamara (Michael Millar). Elsa beams at his triumphs, even while some of her husband's outlandish deceits, such as claiming to have been in the French Foreign Legion, and eccentricities, for example, an eye patch that comes and goes as need be, threaten to make him a laughing stock.

The Iraq War in 2003 seems to send Mott over the edge, as one might say it did to a considerable section of the American ruling elite and upper middle class. He proposes to officials of the new puppet Iraqi government in Washington the “mother of all peace conferences,” which would bring together rival Shia and Sunni factions under the aegis of his EPG. The Iraqis, unimpressed, more or less laugh at his plan. Reeling home that evening, Mott confronts an enraged Elsa. “You stink of alcohol,” she snaps. Not to be outdone, Mott replies venomously, “You reek of the grave.” He physically abuses her, bringing the police.

When Elsa finds Mott one afternoon in bed with a man, she throws him out. “You disgrace! You lie, you lie!” She lets him know he is nothing but a “disgusting gigolo.” Exiled from Washington and his wife’s house, Mott begins some time later to phone Elsa and let her know he is involved in the “most exhilarating and terrifying work I’ve ever done.” He avers that he is in Iraq, embedded as a double agent with the forces of Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia leader then at odds with the US, attempting to implement a plan to end the war in Iraq by—again—bringing together the various Iraqi sects. His faxes and communications, which read “Villa Zarathustra, Sadr City, Iraq,” reach the US State Department, whose officials respond negatively to this supposed “one-man, freelance diplomatic operation.” On his (alleged) return to the US, Mott purports to be a brigadier general in the new Iraqi army and wears what he claims is its uniform and medals.

The viewer has reason to be skeptical about Mott’s grandiose pretensions, which painfully and tragically unravel.

Georgetown is something of a “slow burn.” Perhaps Waltz’s film never quite bursts into flame, but it diligently and intelligently sets about its work. Waltz is fine here, and almost makes one forget his presence in Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* and *Django Unchained*, both dreadful works. Redgrave and Bening do well. The script is carefully written and organized.

Waltz excels at a type of European ironic satire, portraying an intensely self-important and transparently insincere individual whose words are at sharp odds with his actions. Here, his Mott is a highly conflicted figure, fanatically polite and formal, even ceremonial in public, but beset in private by bitter resentments, self-loathing and self-doubt. However, unlike the politicians and diplomats he attempts to cajole and influence, Mott is unable to subdue his personal demons (alcohol doesn’t help either), a failing that leads to his downfall.

Georgetown presents Washington and its leading personalities in a very poor light. Supposedly substantial figures, whatever their political views and official positions, Hagel, McNamara, Soros, Rocard, Scalia, Cheney and the rest, some of whom we see, some of whom we do not, must strike one as vain, superficial and essentially stupid human beings. These “movers and shakers” are easily taken in by a glib con artist, armed only with a handful of banal phrases, “old world charm” and the ability to improvise.

Writing about the real man, Foer in the *Times Magazine* commented: “To attract eminences to his group, Muth began by ordering thick stationery that he adorned with a crest of his own design. He signed the letters with an impressive title, Count Albi—which Muth claimed was a distant relative who had suffered a debilitating fall from an Indian elephant—passed down to him. ... To score a big-name dinner guest or a favor from a V.I.P. in Washington, there was no point messing around with official channels or wasting time with midlevel functionaries. Underlings fear for their careers and are more likely to examine new acquaintances for potential peril. But there’s an unexpected naïveté among the truly powerful; they assume that anyone who has arrived at their desk has survived the scrutiny of handlers.”

Foer refers to “Washington’s susceptibility to fakery,” which helps to explain “how Muth [after 2003] could continue living his Iraq fantasy.” But one needs to be more precise. This is not simply some general, transhistorical “susceptibility.” Involved here are the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the “unipolar moment” that mesmerized America’s politicians and generals and convinced them to embark on the drive for global hegemony that has cost the

populations of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria *and* the US so much misery and suffering. This is not necessarily what Waltz had in mind, but it will occur to many viewers.

Mott fabricates, fantasizes to get ahead. But he was only imitating his “eminent” betters. This was the era during which the Big Lie truly and forcefully entered and indeed took hold of American political life. The Bush administration’s “case” against Iraq, involving accusations that the Saddam Hussein regime possessed weapons of mass destruction, was long ago exposed as a tissue of falsehoods.

Speaking of the pretext for the invasion of the Middle Eastern nation in March 2003, the WSWS once observed that not since “Hitler and the Nazis dressed up storm troopers as Polish soldiers and staged ‘attacks’ on German positions in 1939 has there been such a flagrant and cynical effort to manufacture a casus belli.”

Absurdly, Mott presents a certificate, which he obviously obtained through the mail, confirming his rank as an Iraqi general. This is an act of fraud, but it should be seen in the proper context. In 2008, the Center for Public Integrity, the public policy journalism organization, counted at least 935 demonstrably false statements made on 532 separate occasions during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq by the following officials: Bush, Cheney, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and press secretaries Ari Fleischer and Scott McClellan. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the rest of the leading American media outlets played their parts as well. Millions have died as a result.

In Chaplin’s *Monsieur Verdoux*, referred to above, the comic genius plays an urbane, mild-mannered bank teller laid off after 30 years of service. To support his invalid wife and his child, he turns to marrying and murdering wealthy widows. At his trial, Verdoux argues that the world encourages large-scale killing, and he is little more than an amateur.

Albrecht Gero Muth was convicted of first-degree murder by a jury for his brutal crime in January 2014. A “D.C. Superior Court judge sentenced him to 50 years in prison,” reported the *Washington Post*, “stopping short of prosecutors’ request for life without parole.”

Bush, Cheney, Powell, Rumsfeld, Rice and the others walk around scot-free.



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