THE CURRENT CINEMA

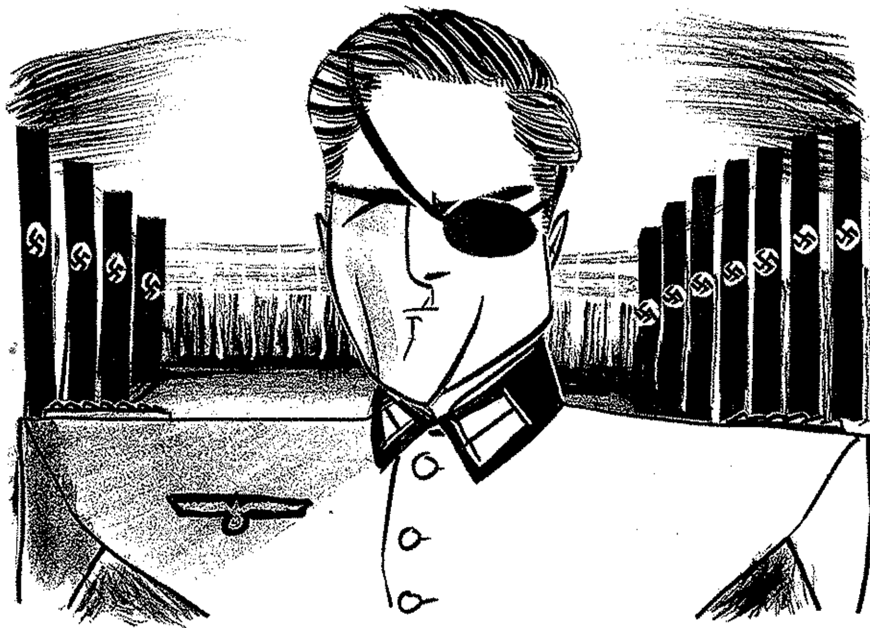
PRIVATE WARS

"Valkyrie" and "Waltz with Bashir."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Of the many historical questions raised by "Valkyrie," the most pressing is this: if General Erich Fellgiebel, the head of the German Army Signal Corps, really had looked and behaved like Eddie Izzard, just how grave a threat would the Nazis have presented to world peace? In Bryan Singer's new film, Izzard, clearly enjoying every stride in his polished, knee-high boots, does indeed play the officer in question, who oversaw communications going into and out of the *Wolfsschanze*, or Wolf's Lair, the Führer's woodland redoubt.

It was in his Lair that the Wolf came closest to being savaged by his own pack. There had been schemes against Adolf Hitler before, but it was not until the Stauffenberg plot that the motive, the means, and the opportunity cohered. The only thing missing was luck. Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, by then the chief of staff of the Reserve Army, was good-looking, high-born, much decorated, and bereft of one hand and one eye, lost in action in North Africa. In short, he was a warring Teuton straight out of central casting, complete with piratical eye patch, and that is why central casting was right to go directly to Tom Cruise. He carries the movie, although, once you dig beneath the uniform, there isn't much for him to get a handle on; the fascination with Stauffenberg resides in what he did, not in who he was.



Tom Cruise as Claus von Stauffenberg, a colonel who tried to assassinate Hitler.

Singer and his screenwriter, Christopher McQuarrie, last worked together on "The Usual Suspects," and there are passages here that recall the suavity of the earlier film (which remains Singer's best). The plan is for Stauffenberg to carry a briefcase bomb into the fortified bunker where he will be meeting Hitler, and then to sidle out before it blows. At the last minute, the heat of the day—July 20, 1944—causes a move to a flimsier hut, and, in one brilliant travelling shot, we see Cruise's eyes flick sideways to the hut's open windows, which can only weaken the blast. Then, in a cloakroom, as he struggles to plug the fuses into the explosive, his single hand betrays him and the briefcase threatens to slide from his grasp: the intimate, semi-comic desperation of this is exquisitely painful to watch, and, were it allied to a larger sense of the labyrinthine, as it was in "The Usual Suspects," the whole movie would coil neatly into a ball of suspense. Instead of which, it unravels.

The problem is not that we know the outcome. (The bomb went off, but the Führer's injuries were light.) We know that de Gaulle, likewise, never fell to an assassin, but that didn't stop "The Day of the Jackal" from getting under your skin. The problem is the buildup. Valkyrie was the name of a plan, which Hitler himself approved, to mobilize the military reserve in the event of a coup. The plotters tried to use this to their advantage, spreading rumors of an S.S. coup immediately after the bombing, and thus duping the Army into supporting their cause; how they expected to reveal the bluff and still enjoy the Army's support is anyone's guess. (That's what you get when aristocrats with a conscience run the show. Valkyrie didn't lack courage or commitment. It lacked N.C.O.s.) Singer does his best to unpick this tangle, but it remains highly confusing, and he is not helped by his decision to recruit an entire battalion of veteran British performers.

Character acting is, of course, one of the four things that the British still do supremely well, the others being soldiering, tailoring, and getting drunk in public, but you can have too much of a good thing, and there were points in "Valkyrie" when I felt that I was watching a slightly outré installment of the Harry Potter series. General Friedrich Olbricht was one of the prime movers in the conspiracy, but Bill Nighy, playing him in clear-rimmed spectacles, is his usual self—funny, quivering, and borderline fey. I found it hard to picture him receiving the Iron Cross. And how about Terence Stamp as General Beck? Or the ever-perplexed Tom Wilkinson as General Friedrich Fromm, a human hog? These men are meant to be battle-toughened Nazi officers, but what we get is an array of discreetly amusing studies in mild neurosis. No wonder Eddie Izzard feels at home. The one exception is David Bamber, who assumes the role of the Führer and delivers not a rant but a low-toned portrait of a paranoiac, his gaze pre-shadowed with suspicion; it's as

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though he were waiting for the bomb, already priming himself for revenge. When it came, it was vicious: some two hundred people were executed. Stauffenberg set the noblest of moral examples, but what makes "Valkyrie" more depressing than exciting is that it forces you to ask, against your judgment, what, exactly, he achieved.

Nobody watching the start of "Waltz with Bashir," a new animated film from Israel, could foresee the subtlety to come. The opening scene snaps the audience awake, but it doesn't go easy on the symbolism. A pack of dogs—twenty-six in all—with jaws and eyeballs of a murderous gold, pound along a city street. Which particular aggressor, we wonder, do they stand for? Here's the first twist: they don't. They come from a nightmare, suffered by a man named Boaz, who in 1982 was serving in the Israeli Army. One night, his unit approached a village that was harboring Palestinian militants; the local hounds acted as an early-warning system, so it was Boaz's job to shoot them with a silenced rifle. Guess how many he killed.

We know this because Boaz—a real guy, not a fictional character—tells the story. He tells it to Ari Folman, the director of "Waltz with Bashir," who has made a movie so unusual that it overflows any box in which you try to contain it. Call it an adult psychodocumentary combat cartoon and you're halfway there. Folman himself appears throughout the story, lightly stylized for the sake of graphic simplicity. He listens, over a drink, to Boaz's recollections, but regrets that he can't help. "I'm just a filmmaker," he says. "Films can be therapeutic," Boaz replies. What I liked about "Waltz with Bashir" is that it confronts so much and, whatever Boaz says, resolves so little. You come out feeling more troubled in mind than when you went in, and with considerable scarring to your mind's eye.

As a nineteen-year-old, Folman himself was part of the Israeli Defense Forces that went into Lebanon. He is triggered by Boaz's memories into realizing, to his consternation, that he has none of his own. He was present, he knows, at the notorious occasion, in September, 1982, on which Christian Phalangists entered the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, in West Beirut (whose entry points were controlled by the I.D.F.), and carried out a massacre of the civilians inside, but nothing of that time has, until now, stayed in his head. This makes sense: the worse the trauma and the guilt, the deeper it lurks under the volcano, and only when Ari meets up with Boaz does the lava begin to flow. He is soon visited by his own dream—an ominous vision of himself and his comrades, rising naked from the sea off the coast of Beirut. This is one of many fluid images that stream through the film, ranging from spits of rain on a car window to a giant woman who backstrokes in the ocean, cradling another friend of Ari's on her bosom. These harrowed men seem to believe that they were born out of amniotic peace into a new horror, where the dominant liquid was blood.

You could argue that the film has no business forging such beauty out of savage facts. What comfort is it to the relatives of the Sabra and Shatila victims, you might ask, that a few conscripts who stood by and did nothing are now free to articulate, and even to lyricize, their internal pain? My suspicion is that Folman is all too aware of that charge. That is why, whatever the rapture that laps at his work, its basic rhythm is hard and halting. (Much of the dialogue is pure questioning: "Shooting? At who?" "How do I know?") Ari goes from one old colleague to the next, probing them for what actually occurred on those September nights. We learn of the single foe with a grenade launcher who took on Israelis in an orchard, and turned out to be a kid; of the soldier who doused himself in patchouli, so that his fellows could trace him in the dark; and of another, Ori, who kept the worst violence at bay by telling himself that he was simply watching a movie.

At the end of "Waltz with Bashir," we suddenly switch to normal film: genuine news footage from the refugee camps. The screen is filled with the dead, including a child. I know what Folman wants to do here, but it strikes me as a mistake. He has already admitted, via Ori's tale, that a camera can both present us with suffering and shield us from it (that is the paradox of TV), and, what is more, we have spent the past ninety minutes coming to terms with the style and the conviction of his filmmaking. His chosen idiom, with its jagged lines and its unforgettable coloring—sick yellows and bruised browns, like a black eye—has proved more than adequate to the summoning of things that he, like some of his countrymen, had fought to forget. Why scorn it now? When reality bites, is that the time for the artist to lay down his brush? ♦

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VOLUME LXXXIV, NO. 43, January 5, 2009. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: February 9 & 16, June 8 & 15, July 6 & 13, August 10 & 17, and December 21 & 28) by Condé Nast Publications, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: The Condé Nast Building, 4 Times Square, New York, NY 10036. Drew Schutte, vice-president and publishing director; David Miller, associate publisher; Terese Cunningham, advertising director; Norman M. Miller, advertising director; Maria Tenaglia, advertising director; Suzanne Reinhardt, director of finance and business operations; Daniella Wells, associate publisher of creative services and marketing; Jacqueline Cinguina, executive director of marketing and integrated strategy; Alice McKown, executive director, creative services; John Rice, executive creative development director; Lynn Oberlander, general counsel. Condé Nast Publications: S. I. Newhouse, Jr., chairman; Charles H. Townsend, president and C.E.O.; John W. Bellando, executive vice-president and C.O.O.; Debi Chirichella Sabino, senior vice-president and C.F.O.; Jill Bright, executive vice-president/human resources. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001. Canada Post: return undeliverable Canadian addresses to P.O. Box 874, Station Main, Markham, ON L3P 8L4.

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