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## 'Operation Finale' spy thriller has a Ben Kingsley problem

War criminal written as dynamic character; film exchanges accuracy for heroism, drama

**H**annah Arendt, the mid-century philosopher and Holocaust refugee, conceived her theory of the banality of evil in a Jerusalem courtroom while covering the 1961 trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann.

As a defendant, Eichmann, a man who never finished high school and had failed at everything he touched until he excelled — historically — in the logistics of genocide, was so mundane, self-centered and insipid that Arendt describes a “dilemma between the unspeakable horror of the deeds and the undeniable ludicrousness of the man who perpetuated them.”

Before he was captured and taken to Israel, Eichmann escaped from an American prison camp in Germany and fled with his family to a welcoming Argentina.

He was discovered there when the father of a girl his son was dating, a former Dachau prisoner, recognized the boy's famous surname. (Eichmann used a pseudonym in Argentina, but his children continued to use the name Eichmann.)

“Operation Finale” is a compellingly suspenseful film, directed

by Chris Weitz (“Rogue One: A Star Wars Story”), based on Eichmann's May 1960 capture by Israeli intelligence agents.

The film follows the experience of the Mossad captors, young men on a mission of drama and adventure and provides a taste of the tedious and brutally of covert work — how things can go awry.

The story is told from the perspective of Peter Malkin (Oscar Isaac), the Mossad agent primarily credited with Eichmann's capture, interrogation and transport back to Israel.

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Charming, manipulative and impulsive, Malkin has been sidelined in the agency because he's made some big mistakes. Success in the Eichmann matter represents to him an opportunity for redemption — for himself and for his ghosts.



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Isaac, who resembles a young Omar Sharif, has become a go-to choice for anti-authoritarian casting, beginning with the Coen Brothers' “Inside Llewyn Davis” through his Harrison Ford-ish role as Po in “Star Wars: The Last Jedi.”

The young star's energetic performance is complemented by the levity of comedian Nick Kroll, who plays fellow Mossad agent Rafi Eitan.

Inevitably, “Operation Finale” takes dramatic license with some

details of the capture. In real life, there was no female doctor participating in the mission as Malkin's love interest. And smuggling Eichmann out of Argentina wasn't the breathless squeaker the movie makes it out to be.

The film's problem is Ben

Kingsley.

It's not that his performance as Eichmann is subpar. As one expects, Kingsley is exemplary.

It's that through Kingsley Eichmann is presented as a dignified, dedicated family man, proud of his contribution to the war effort — not majestic, but certainly magisterial.

A one-dimensional portrayal that set up Eichmann as a straw villain without providing insight into his perspective would have killed the film dramatically.

But with Kingsley in the role, Eichmann is portrayed as a sly fox, a verbal fencer, a worthy opponent in a cat-and-mouse game with his Mossad interrogators.

According to Arendt's now-famous New Yorker account, Eichmann was nothing of the sort.

So while “Operation Finale” may revisit a moment in history about which we were never more than hazy, it is a drama about historic heroism, not a cautionary tale.

The movie doesn't presume the role of messenger that normal men and women — not just manic masterminds and mad geniuses — in the name of patriotism, following orders and doing their jobs, may willingly commit and permit atrocities when fed the right recipe of opportunity, encouragement and lies.

As for Eichmann, after a trial of several months, in which more than 100 Holocaust survivors testified, he was ultimately convicted of crimes against humanity, war crimes, crimes against the Jewish people and membership in a criminal organization.

He was hanged in 1962. A special oven was built for his cremation. His ashes were scattered at sea, beyond the borders of Israeli territorial waters.