



OCTOBER 11-13

FASHION TRAIL
THROUGH LIMERICKS FASHION QUARTER

WOMENS
MINI-MARATHON

POST-RACE
PARTY NIGHT

LADIES DAY AT THE RACES

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Irish Daily Mail



LIMERICK LEADER

Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

If we forget past demons, evil triumphs

MY eldest son often inquires if the Devil is real, if he has appeared in his 'true form' on Earth. It is difficult for a father to answer such questions, especially when his child is so fearful of evil. My usual tactic is to say that evil is present whenever good is absent.

Putting a face on evil is, however, not so easy. I have shown my son images of Hitler, Saddam Hussein and Pol Pot, to which he has replied: 'But they don't look like the Devil!' How true, especially in those photos where the despots are smiling for the camera. Observing those Nazis accused of mass genocide at the Nuremberg Trials, the philosopher Hannah Arendt famously spoke of the 'banality of evil'. By this she meant that the atrocities were not perpetrated by devils, but by human beings who appeared very ordinary. Some were devoted parents who spent their evenings playing with the children while listening to Mozart.

If, despite their banality, we have little sympathy for those found guilty at Nuremberg, it is due to the work of some great moralists. We could never have known the true extent of Nazi evil were it not for those who told the stories of daily life inside the death camps. Filmmakers, novelists and conscientious journalists walked us through the squalor, the gas chambers and took us to the edge of the mass graves. By giving the victims a voice, and by depicting the true extent of their suffering, they enabled us to see the true face of evil.

George Orwell termed this 'generous anger'. Such anger is not vengeful, but 'assumes that the evil has merely to be noticed to be remedied'. Filmmakers and novelists confront us with wickedness in the hope that, by noticing it, we shall never again allow it flourish. One such filmmaker is my friend Gerry Gregg, whose two films on Serbian atrocities in Kosovo were cited in evidence during the war crimes trial of Slobodan Milošević at The Hague. His new film, *Close To Evil*, tells how Holocaust survivor, Tomi Reichental, tries to meet one of the SS guards present during his time at Bergen-Belsen. It was there and at Auschwitz that 35 members of his family were exterminated.

Tomi has spent his life telling the story of the pain he endured, and the evil he witnessed, as a young boy at Belsen. He has visited countless Irish schools in the hope that, by sharing his experiences, the horror of the

Holocaust will never be repeated. Tomi is driven by generous anger, something that Gerry Gregg dramatically highlights in his film.

The former SS guard Tomi wants to meet is Hilde Lisiewicz. Now in her 90s, she is a devout Catholic who lives in Germany with her three children. In 1945, she was convicted of the murder of two inmates for which she served just one year. Tomi wants to meet Hilde, not to condemn, but to offer her redemption. He wants to give her a chance to express sorrow for her crimes, something which he believes will give them both some closure. While he cannot fully forgive, he wants 'to reach out' his hand.

The problem is that Hilde is in total denial. The film contains previously unseen footage of a relatively recent interview with her, and what we see is not the face of evil, but a gentle, smiling old woman.

'I didn't do anything wrong,' she says. Despite having been convicted of murder and mistreatment, she has convinced her family that she worked only in the camp's kitchen. What is worse, she seems convinced herself.

DENYING all the evidence against her, she declares that she has 'made peace' with herself. She claims she never has nightmares, and it is only when she cannot sleep that she recalls her former life. Despite the fact that Tomi remembers children playing among corpses, Hilde says there were no bodies and no stench of death, for which Belsen was notorious.

Close To Evil is a remarkable study of memory, forgetting and forgiving. Gerry understands that if Tomi's story is not told through a medium that reaches the widest possible audience, we will forget the huge moral crimes of the last century. It is then that we shall cease to notice evil, thus risking its resurgence.

Tomi believes that by forgetting we can never forgive. It is only when confront our inner demons that we can reconcile with the past. Only then can find it within ourselves to beg the forgiveness of those we have wronged. Hilde, as she says at one point in the film, has 'completely forgotten'. Hence she does not want Tomi's forgiveness. Somehow, she has managed to reconstruct her memory so that she is now the victim of the story.

On Sunday, Gerry and Tomi will answer questions after a 1.30pm screening of *Close To Evil* at the IFI. Hilde Michnia, as she is now known, will not be present. It being Sunday, she will be in her local church ironing the priest's vestments.

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DON'T MISS JOHN WATERS' PROVOCATIVE COLUMN EVERY WEEK IN **The Irish Mail** ON SUNDAY