

BERLIN

THE SPECIALIST

(UN SPECIALISTE)

(DOCU - FRENCH - B&W)

An Intermedia Arc presentation of a Memento production, in association with BIFF (Germany), Lotus Films (Austria), Image Creation (Belgium), Amythos (Israel). (International sales: Arcapix & Intermedia Arc Pictures, London.)

Produced, directed by Eyal Sivan. Screenplay, Sivan, Rony Brauman. Original camera (B&W, video, 36mm blowup). Leo T. Hurwitz; digital lighting design, Jean-Marc Fabre; editor, Audrey Maurion; music, Yves Robert, Krishna Levy, Beatrice Thiriel, Jean-Michel Levy; sound design (Dolby Digital SRD), Nicolas Becker; associate producers, Elke Peters, Erich Laclmer, Martine Barbe, Amit Breuer. Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (Official Program - Special Screening), Feb. 13, 1999. Running time: 123 MIN.

(Hebrew, German, English and French dialogue)

By EDDIE COCKRELL

The Specialist," from Israeli-born, Paris-based Eyal Sivan, is a singularly assured, sure-to-be-controversial documentary that recasts footage from the 1961 Jerusalem trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann into a hypnotic dance of bureaucratic stubbornness, highlighting the very ordinariness of this eccentric, relentlessly unrepentant monster. Cutting-edge, unique item is a must for — but not limited to — Jewish and docu fests, and has limited theatrical possibilities if handled properly. It's assured a long life in ancillary markets (including the classroom) on video and particularly videodisc, where depth and breadth of pic's technical wizardry and audacious narrative presentation can be debated by scholars of both the docu form and the Holocaust.

Organized into 13 sections punctuated by blackouts, the film immediately announces itself as something other than a straight presentation of the material, with a prologue composed of disembodied voices from the trial recordings and a discordant, foreboding score. Looking like a constipated accountant, the man who specialized in the "Jewish issue" and was

charged with Jews' mass deportation to concentration camps from 1941-45, is first seen cleaning his glasses and gingerly cleaning the desk in his glass booth with a handkerchief.

As the trial progresses, Eichmann emerges as a master of denial and obfuscation, freely admitting the crimes were committed but insisting he was "weak and powerless" to stop it. He invokes a parade of deflections — "That was unfortunate, but it wasn't my fault," "I had orders to carry out" and endless other variations.

Defense lawyer Robert Servatius hardly says a word on behalf of his client, while the three Israeli judges of German origin each approach the accused in a different manner. The audience at the trial is glimpsed only briefly (a few protesters are escorted out), yet an entire section of the film is devoted to the testimony of survivors (whose faces are digitally superimposed on the booth's glass).

Sivan says the project came about when co-scripter Rony Brauman was given a copy of Hannah Arendt's "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil" and was particularly taken with her assertion that Eichmann was an ordinary man whose "normality is much more terrifying than all atrocities together." The scriptwriters' approach is clearly reverent yet distinctly mischievous, managing to relish unintentional sight gags afforded by Eichmann's bizarre behavior while acknowledging the drab but hypnotic countenance of the man.

This dichotomy is shown in the film's two most prominent digital effects: In the first, the guards flanking Eichmann are subtly erased and replaced (few in the Berlin premiere audience seemed to notice), while the second, climactic effect suggests that the spirit of the evil civil servant

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FILM REVIEWS

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is still alive in a cubicle somewhere, just waiting to be summoned.

Tech aspects explore fresh ways of presenting primitively shot material. Israel pacted with ABC, which hired blacklisted docu filmmaker Leo T. Hurwitz to design and oversee a four-camera, two-inch video setup recording the trial (with angles selected by him in real time) from the chambers specially built in the main auditorium of Jerusalem's House of the People. (Hurwitz's own film on the subject, "Verdict for Tomorrow," won Emmy and Peabody awards in 1961.) Finished film is sculpted from the 350 surviving hours of the 500 shot over eight months, with the sound replaced by the higher-quality tapes recorded by the Voice of Israel radio.

The jarring score is, of special note, with the unorthodox guitars, trombones and glass harmonica of the listed quartet supplemented by, of all things, Tom Waits' "Russian Dance" over the closing credits.

Along with James Moll's "The Last Days," "The Specialist" was one of two high-profile docus presented as special screenings in the Berlinale's official program, heading a pan-sectional theme of movies about the Holocaust, racism and discrimination dubbed "Documents Against Forgetting."