Always great to see The Mitch Man on the front page of The Cleveland Fan. We sent our trusty film critic out to go see Quentin Tarantino's heavily hyped new film, "Inglorious Basterds". Mitch had high expectations of the film, based on Tarantino's reputation and the advanced buzz generated about the project. And while it wasn't quite what he was expecting, Mitch felt it lived up to the hype, calling it Quentin's best film since "Pulp Fiction". He reviews it for our readers in his latest.

"Original" is such an overused word when it comes to movies, as every film you see can be traced back to having roots in at least fifty other films. Plot, characters, style...at some point, it's all been done before, and even with the most "original" of films, you can always find several other movies that it reminds you of, despite the fact that the director may be looking at things in an entirely unique way.

Going into "Inglorius Basterds", I was expecting this phenomenon to re-appear. I had high expectations of the film, based on Quentin Tarantino's reputation, and the advanced buzz generated about the project...much higher than I heard prior to "Kill Bill" or "Grindhouse", but I was still expecting to see all kinds of similarities to other WWII movies as well as certain things from Tarantino based upon his other works.

I was wrong. "Inglorius Basterds" is truly one movie where you can use the word "original". The phrase I keep seeing from other critics is "revenge fantasy", but I'm not quite sure that's really what it is. "Historical fantasy" may be a better phrase, as Tarantino has the audacity to take one of America's most revered memories; the conducting of the Second World War, and take it into the realm of "alternate reality". But this is no science fiction work; it is simply telling a wonderful Tall Tale, and telling it very well.

I was expecting Tarantino's take on "The Dirty Dozen", as that was the movie this was so often being compared to. But that wasn't the case. The men Lt. Aldo Raines (Brad Pitt) recruited weren't criminals picked for one suicide mission, rather they were Jewish soldiers who volunteered to drop behind enemy lines, abandon their uniforms, and become terrorists to the occupying Nazi army (and they do...in scenes not meant for the squimish).

But the movie wasn't 100% about "the Basterds", even if they were at the center of it. Indeed, Pitt and company don't even make their first appearance until almost twenty-five minutes into the film, and then disappear from the narrative almost entirely at other places while Tarantino focuses on other characters.

I was also expecting this to be a WWII version of "Pulp Fiction", but that's not accurate either. Yes, Tarantino's famous rapid fire dialogs are present as well as shocking violence, obscure pop references, and off-beat humor; but it's not in the same style at all as "Pulp Fiction". The dialog is more serious, and far less glib. The best example of this is during the Chapter One, as a conniving, brutal, but still debonair SS Colonel named Hans Landa interrogates a French farmer regarding the whereabouts of a Jewish family Landa is trying to track down. It is an interesting chess match between the officer and the farmer, even if you can tell right from the start that the Frenchman is no match for the German. And using this type of heavy dialog piece to start out an action movie? Unheard of, but it works.

At the same time, the humor he uses is far less subtle than we've seen in Tarantino's other films. Most of these involve the walking contradiction that is Aldo Raine. Pitt is magnificent as the "Apache" commander from a moonshine running family in the Tennessee mountains. He seems to bounce effortlessly between being the brilliant and ruthless tactician ("we ain't in the prisoner-takin' business; we in the killin' Nazi business. And cousin, Business is a-boomin'"), and being the comic foil of the film, especially later on when he is masquerading as an Italian escort to a German film star/Allied secret agent (Diane Kruger). His gruff, Tennessee accented attempt to speak Italian around Germans who "cannot distinguish Italian accents" is hilarious.

Pitt is rightfully billed as the star of this film, but what makes it great are the performances of three actors who are not known at all in America. Heading that list is Christoph Waltz as Col. Landa. Tarantino certainly gave him all the material he needed in the script, but you must credit the actor as well, as Waltz has created a villain who I predict will go down as one of the greatest ever seen on screen; every bit as memorable as a Darth Vader, Captain Queeg, Anton Chigurh, or maybe the best comparison; Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes) from "Schindler's List". Landa is as cruel, cunning, and sadistic as the worst of them, but his is also extremely smart, charming, sophisticated, and every bit as good at lying and manipulating for his own self preservation as is Don Draper in "Mad Men".

On the other side of the spectrum is French actress Mélanie Laurent as Shosanna/Emmanuelle. Having escaped the Nazis after they butchered her family, she abandons her identity as a Jew, and takes over the operation of a small cinema in Paris. Laurent is heartbreaking as the fiery, emotionally damanged, revenge driven young woman...but she is still able to portray the intense fear she has when meeting face-to-face with none other than Joseph Goebbels. A meeting made possible due to the stalker-ish actions of a young German private named Fredrick Zoller, played by German actor Daniel Brühl, a movie buff smitten by the young French lass, oblivious to her disdain. Brühl is excellent in showing a young man caught up in the celebrity that his actions on the battlefield have given him, but still unsure of himself, and somewhat disdainful of the attention he is getting.

There are a lot of characters listed here, and Tarantino does an admirable job in weaving all of their narratives together in a way that often resembles a mystery. You just aren't sure how all of these pieces fit together, and for perhaps the first half of the movie, you are wondering if it is all just separate stories than just remotely intersect as if they were in a Robert Altman project. But come together they do, and in a violent, shocking, and completely unexpected manner.

Not everything works perfectly. Some parts get a bit muddled, and some characters are hard to keep apart, especially when it comes to The Basterds, only three of whom you really get to know anything about (although one of them, Hugo Stiglitz, is introduced in mock-70s style by a voice-over provided by Samuel L. Jackson, an interesting, but out of place, device). Worst is the inclusion of Mike Myers as a British General setting up a mission with a bilingual movie critic. As a critic, of course I loved the idea of finding a way to make a movie critic the only person who can pull off an important spy mission; but Myers was completely wrong for the part. As you watch the whole thing, all you can think of is "hey, there's Mike Myers doing his Austin Powers hokey British accent!" Much more effective was having 60s/70s action star Rod Taylor ("The Birds", "The Time Machine") playing Winston Churchill.

In all, "Inglorious Basterds" is like nothing I've really seen before, and is by far the best Tarantino movie since he burst upon the scene with "Pulp Fiction". It may not be for everyone, but for me, it was one of the best films I've seen this year.

My Rating: Brian Sipe: 3 ½ footballs