

The Boys From Brazil

US / UK : 1978 : dir. Franklin J Schaffner : ITC / 20th Century Fox : 124 min
 prod: Martin Richards & Stanley O'Toole : scr: Heywood Gold : dir.ph.: Henry Decae
[Jeremy Black](#) [d]; [Raul Faustino Saldanho](#)
 Gregory Peck; Laurence Olivier; James Mason; Lili Palmer; Uta Hagen; John Dehner;
 Rosemary Harris; Anne Meara; John Rubinstein; Denholm Elliott; Steven Guttenberg;
 David Hurst; Bruno Ganz; Walter Gotell; Michael Gough; Prunella Scales; Wolfgang Preiss

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 ∅ M ∅	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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**“ 94 men must die to keep alive a dream
 – or a nightmare! ”**



*“I’m the world’s best character actor!”
 “No, curse you, I’m the world’s best character actor!”
 Source: [Rating the Movies \(1990\)](#)*

Leonard Maltin’s Movie and Video Guide
1996 review:

“Former Nazi chieftain Dr Josef Mengele (Peck) has an insidious plan to breed a new race of Hitlers. Interesting but ultimately silly and unbelievable; definitely worth watching, though, for Olivier’s brilliant, credible performance as the aging Jewish Nazi-hunter. Based on the Ira Levin novel. ****1½** ”

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – approximate translation of the above

Halliwel’s Film Guide review:

“A renegade Nazi in hiding has a sinister plot to reconquer the world. Suspense fantasy firmly based on a gripping book; excellent performances, but a shade too long. Scr: Heywood Gold, from the novel by Ira Levin. Academy Award nominations: Jerry Goldsmith – Best Original Score; Laurence Olivier – Best Supporting Actor. * ”

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

“An elderly Jewish Nazi-hunter (Laurence Olivier) sets out to discover why the world is becoming populated with adolescent Hitler clones, leading him eventually to an Auschwitz doctor (Gregory Peck). Whatever qualities were apparent in Ira Levin’s thriller have been lost in this adaptation, which is prodigal in its waste – of Olivier, of the director, of James Mason and Lilli Palmer (in small roles), and of location shots throughout the world. * ”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
 review:

“Director Franklin Schaffner gives Ira Levin’s gimmicky thriller the big treatment, so that its small virtues tend to get lost. Peck as Nazi war criminal Josef Mengele is ludicrously off his best. Olivier is brilliant, doing a fussy

Albert Basserman imitation as the hero modelled, loosely, on Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal. ****1/2** ”

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

“Peck and Olivier star in this weird drama that exploits popular fears concerning cloning and its potential for being used for evil purposes. In this case, Dr Josef Mengele, who conducted sadistic human experiments in Nazi death camps, is on the loose in South America with a scheme to produce 94 copies of Adolf Hitler. Mengele is played by Peck, Olivier plays a Jewish Nazi-hunter. There are moments of suspense here and there, but the shaky story, based on Ira Levin’s best-selling novel, lapses into silliness. Also with Lilli Palmer, Uta Hagen, Denholm Elliott and Steve Guttenberg. Academy Award nomination – Olivier, Best Actor ****1/2** ”

The Time Out Film Guide review:

“Ira Levin’s novel was so obviously devised for the cinema that it reads more like a script. Its premise was ingenious: why has a Nazi hit-team from South America begun a systematic slaughter of innocuous middle-aged professional men all over Europe? The answer should have made a great thriller, but the film is sunk by a series of preposterous performances. There are more phoney German accents than in a prep school version of “**Colditz**”, and Levin’s expert plotting is buried beneath an avalanche of lines like “Vat are we goink to do?”. Easy answer.”

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

“Ira Levin’s compulsively readable book about Nazi resurgence in South America is turned into a film which tends to underline its latent absurdities. It contains excellent visuals by French cinematographer Henry Decae and good supporting portrayals by Lilli Palmer and Denholm Elliott, outsmarting the three principals, Gregory Peck, Laurence Olivier and James Mason, all of whom seem rather uneasily cast. ******”

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

“With two excellent antagonists in Gregory Peck and Laurence Olivier, “**THE BOYS FROM BRAZIL**” presents a gripping, suspenseful drama for nearly all of its two

hours – then lets go at the end and falls into a heap. In a fine shift from his usual roles, Peck plays the evil Josef Mengele, a real-life character who murdered thousands of Jews, including many children, carrying out bizarre genetic experiments at Auschwitz in Poland. Olivier, slipping completely into the role of an elderly Jewish gentleman, is the Nazi hunter who brings him to bay.

With the aid of James Mason, Peck is out to assassinate 94 fathers around the world. In a brief but lively part, Steven Guttenberg discovers the plot and tips Olivier, who sets out to find how the killings fit together. His search turns up three identical lads, all played menacingly by Jeremy Black, who are more than triplets. What they are and whence they came are plausibly developed in Heywood Gould’s script (from Ira Levin’s novel) and director Franklin J Schaffner builds the threatening menace well. ”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

“In this thriller, Gregory Peck plays an evil Nazi war criminal with far-fetched plans to resurrect the Third Reich. Laurence Olivier as a Jewish Nazi-hunter pursues him. Rated “R” ****1/2** ”

The Virgin Film Guide review:

“This fast-moving picture features a battle of wits between the “Angel of Death”, Nazi war criminal Josef Mengele (Gregory Peck), and fictional Nazi hunter Ezra Lieberman (Laurence Olivier, his character seemingly based on real-life Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal), in a far-fetched plot having to do with the cloning of Hitler. Mengele’s plan is to harvest hundreds of young men (all of whom have been raised in environments nearly identical to the one that Hitler grew up in) in an attempt to replicate the Fuhrer’s upbringing as well as his genetic structure¹. The picture barrels along for about 115 minutes, but then falls apart in a wildly ludicrous finale. The cast is great – including Peck, Olivier, James Mason, Denholm Elliott, and even Steve Guttenberg (in one of his first roles). The film is compelling, albeit pretty silly in

¹ Oh? How were they going to “replicate” World War I?

its elaborate "what if?" plot
mechanications [sic]. ***1/2 "

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide",
"Movies of the Seventies" or "The Sunday
Times Guide to Movies on Television"]

Radio Times review:

"Ira Levin's ingenious novel about the cloning
of Hitler is given the epic treatment here by
director Franklin J Schaffner. Gregory Peck
plays Dr Mengele, in a convincing departure
from his usual good-guy roles, James Mason is
his accomplice and Laurence Olivier is the
Nazi hunter who tracks them down. It's more
plausible now than it was in the late seventies
and comes across as an accomplished, globe-
trotting thriller. Contains violence. *** "

"Thriller based on the Ira Levin bestseller.
Decades after the end of the Second World
War, infamous Nazi Dr Mengele hatches a plot
from his hiding place in Paraguay to secure the
destiny of the Aryan race. But a Jewish Nazi-
hunter is already on his trail. *** "

What's On TV review:

"Gregory Peck is Nazi scientist Dr Mengele.
Steve Guttenberg discovers his plan for world
domination and Laurence Olivier is an old
Jewish Nazi hunter who follows the ensuing
assassination trail from Paraguay to the US.
James Mason and Lili Palmer also appear in
this expensive and unwieldy thriller. *** "

"Thriller. The infamous Nazi Dr Mengele
plans to take over the world from his base
in Paraguay and orders a series of terrible
murders. "

"What would a father do for his son?" ran the radio trailers when this was first released in London, "What if he were gentle? What if he were kind? What if he were... **mad?**". The answer in this case is absolutely nothing, since the notional "father" of these boys from Brazil shot himself through the temple in 1945. Cloning is a hot topic just now, and three "**JURASSIC PARK**" films have already shown the world some of the fun potential when it falls into the hands – as it inevitable *will* – of the regulation Mad Scientist.

But what is an intriguing if implausible idea – not a million miles from "**THEY SAVED HITLER'S BRAIN**" – degenerates over two hours into out-and-out farce, with geriatric arch-foes Olivier and Peck grappling on the carpet in a life-or-death struggle before Peck has his throat torn out by the dobermans of one of his would-be protégés, all aged 14, and all played indifferently by newcomer Jeremy Black.

Not that the film begins well either. It opens with a disjointed series of meetings in Germany and South America that seem to fulfil no purpose, Olivier's Simon Wiesenthal character is introduced without any dignity as a tetchy old obsessive squabbling about the plumbing in his office, and the intrepid young Nazi-hunter in Paraguay who first tips him off about a plot being hatched is played like a college student engaged on some sort of fraternity hi-jinks. When thus he succeeds in getting himself killed, and a small Paraguayan boy, Ismael (Raul Faustino Saldanho) into the bargain, the audience will not be left very distraught.

Director Schaffner fumbles his material badly, striking altogether the wrong tone from the outset, and his setpiece assassinations (the film is closer in spirit to "**THE OMEN**" than anything) are uninspired. A good cast is largely wasted, but especially Peck in the lead, who does **not** deliver the same bravura performance acting against type as, say, Henry Fonda did in "**ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST**". His Mengele is little more than a comic strip Nazi, flying into a homicidal rage even at a Nazi fundraising party surrounded by ardent admirers.

Olivier got his turn to play the Peck role as another concentration camp doctor in hiding, "Der Weisse Engel" Christian Zell, in "**MARATHON MAN**", which was a better, tenser film and a better, more nuanced performance.

The film is three quarters over before the penny drops for Ezra Lieberman, and perhaps that's because the shown hand – cloning from tissue samples donated by Hitler at the Berghof – seemed too far-fetched in 1978. Now that genetic technology has caught up, the interest in the story shifts to the attempts by the old-Nazi underground network to engineer the key events in Hitler's own boyhood for the 94 surviving clones scattered about Europe and North America. But the film does not explore that idea to any satisfactory degree, and we're left to assume that "Evil" must be largely in the genes anyhow, since the four boys we meet are all malevolent little buggers already, only awaiting destiny's call.

The little Adolfs (hair slicked significantly across the forehead) do not figure large in the events until the final scene, and even the great moment of revelation, when Mengele ecstatically tells an American model just who his progenitor was, is thrown away by the boy snorting derisively. Rick Baker, who won a make-up Oscar for the special effects in "**AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON**", supplied the torn flesh, and may as well have scripted the dialogue, for all the finesse it displays. I've no further information on Jeremy Black, who's the son of actress Karen Black. Holmstrom doesn't even bother to mention him in "*The Moving Picture Boy*". Sorry Jeremy.

This one nearly rates a turkey stamp at the top, to rank among the worst films known to the archive, but it just escapes by a whisker. However, it's certainly a bad movie, and probably Gregory Peck's worst screen performance.

See subject index under **THE CHILD AS EVIL IN OUR MIDST, ORPHANS / ADOPTION, TWINS / LOOKALIKES** and **WAR**.