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# War Torn

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*For Ever Mozart*  
Directed by Jean-Luc Godard  
A New Yorker Films release  
At the Walter Reade  
July 4 through 10

BY AMY TAUBIN

In the '60s, Jean-Luc Godard made films about art, sexual obsession, and death, though not necessarily in that order. Now in his sixties, Godard makes films about art



Art and death in *For Ever Mozart*

and death, with sex barely in the picture. "What? No boobs?" whines an outraged filmgoer, standing in line for *Fatal Bolero*, the film within Godard's 1996 *For Ever Mozart*. "Your fucking film is full of corpses? Let's go to *Terminator 4* instead."

Godard's two great films of the '90s—*Germany Year 90 Nine Zero* and *JLG By JLG*—dealt with the death of communism and cinema (*Germany*) and the death of cinema and the director's personal intimations of morality (*JLG*). After only one viewing, I'm not sure that *For Ever Mozart* is quite in the

same league with those two films; I have no doubt, however, that it's the most straightforward and profound of the films Godard has made about war, beginning with *Les Carabiniers* and including all the work he did under the banner of the Dziga Vertov collective. In other words, it's pretty damn important, and pretty damn moving to boot—which makes its exclusion from the 1996 New York Film Festival pretty damn inexplicable.

Proceeding perhaps from the homily that on the battlefield, the explosion you hear is never the one that

kills you, *For Ever Mozart* is a film in which image and sound are disjoined from the start. As the title *For Ever Mozart* bounces onto the screen, we hear a fragment of Beethoven's "Emperor" concerto (written by an Austrian composer to celebrate the victory of a French general who had delusions of unifying all of Europe under his rule). Immediately after that we see a group of men and women chasing after one another and we hear one of the men calling "Sabine, Sabine"—suggesting that before we eventually find our way to Mozart, we will have to go through some contemporary version of the rape of the Sabine women. With Godard, the end is always present in the beginning.

A movie director (whose face and voice resemble Godard's but whose world-weary demeanor is closer to Fritz Lang's in *Contempt*), is preparing a film about war based on the Spanish novelist Juan Goytisolo's claim that "the history of the 1990s in Europe is a rehearsal, with slight symphonic variations, of the cowardice and chaos of the 1930s." The director's daughter, her male cousin, and the family's Arab maid are simultaneously getting ready to go to Sarajevo to put on a theatrical production of Musset's *One Mustn't Play at Love*.

Wandering in the Bosnian countryside, the actors are captured, raped, forced to dig their own graves, and killed in the crossfire when their captors are ambushed by another guerrilla group. "War is simple. It's sticking a piece of metal in flesh," says one of the characters in the film within the film, but this battle scene—as formally pre-

cise as it's emotionally devastating—is anything but simple.

Singularly unaffected by the death of his daughter, the director, who's shooting his war epic, refuses to film the battle scenes his gangster producer demands. (He must know we've seen enough of them already.) Instead, he gets stuck doing endless retakes of a single page of dialogue when his leading actress is unable to say the word "yes" to his satisfaction.

"I told you you should have turned the page" says the director's assistant when the opening-day audience rejects the film, leaving the director's career in ruins. Those who haven't rushed off to see *T4* wind up at a concert where one young man is drafted to be the page turner for the piano soloist who is performing a Mozart concerto. Outside the director sits on the stairs, half listening as he smokes a cigarette.

In confronting the failure of art to change the course of history and the moral obligation of the artist to nevertheless bear witness to her/his time, *For Ever Mozart* treads on ground so familiar it can only be played as farce. What's extraordinary about the film is the elegance, grace, and gallows humor with which it deals with issues of form, beauty, classicism—and with why Godard, who in my book is the greatest filmmaker of all time, cannot be Mozart. In the age of unreason, a beautiful image (there's not a single frame in this film that's less than ravishingly beautiful) does not lead logically and inevitably to another. Instead, they collide, fragment, and fly apart. Seductive as they are, page turners belong to the past. **V**

NEW YORKER FILMS