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APT PUPIL

(DRAMA)

A Sony Pictures Entertainment release from TriStar Pictures of a Phoenix Pictures presentation of a Bad Hat Harry production. Produced by Jane Hamsher, Don Murphy, Bryan Singer. Executive producer, Tim Harbert. Co-producer, Thomas DeSanto.

Directed by Bryan Singer. Screenplay, Brandon Boyce, based on the novella by Stephen King. Camera (Technicolor, Panavision widescreen), Newton Thomas Sigel; editor, John Ottman; music, Ottman; production designer, Richard Hoover; art director, Kathleen M. McKernin; set designers, Amy Shock, David Eckert; set decorator, Jennifer Herwitz; costume designer, Louise Mingenbach; sound (Dolby/SDDS), Geoffrey Lucius Patterson; associate producers, Ottman, Jay Shapiro; assistant director, Fernando Altschul; casting, Francine Maisler, Kathryn Eisenstein. Reviewed at Sony Studios, Culver City, Aug. 21, 1998. (In Venice Film Festival — Nights and Stars; also in Toronto, Chicago, Sitges and Tokyo festivals.) MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 111 MIN.

Kurt Dussander	Ian McKellen
Todd Bowden	Brad Renfro
Richard Bowden	Bruce Davison
Archie	Elias Koteas
Dan Richler	Joe Morton
Isaac Weiskopf	Jan Triska
Ben Kramer	Michael Byrne
Becky Trask	Heather McComb
Monica Bowden	Ann Dowd
Joey	Joshua Jackson
Edward French	David Schwimmer
Sociology Teacher	Mickey Cottrell

By TODD McCARTHY

A creepy, well-acted story of contagious evil, "Apt Pupil" has more than enough chilling dramatic scenes to rivet the attention but suffers from some hokey contrivances and underlying insufficiencies of motivation. Ian McKellen and Brad Renfro excel as, respectively, a Nazi war criminal and an aggressive small-town high school student who uncovers the man's past. Director Bryan Singer sustains a compellingly sinister tone until unduly extending the final act. Premiered at the Venice Film Festival and due to hit theaters Oct. 16, this Sony release has dual potential audiences — teens drawn by the Stephen King name and more discerning viewers interested in Singer and McKellen — which should combine for reasonable returns. But pic's claustrophobic nature and relative lack of action will likely prevent it from breaking out with a wider public.

Premise is deftly set up, as, in 1984, 16-year-old senior Todd Bowden (Renfro) becomes fascinated by the Holocaust in a school course and, via an old photograph, recognizes a grizzled local resident as one Kurt Dussander (McKellen), a former officer at the Paten concentration camp, where 90,000 prisoners died.

Brazenly, Todd turns up at the old man's door, announces that he has incontrovertible proof that he is, in fact, Dussander and, under threat of turning him in, commands the Nazi to tell him the brutal truth about what he did during the war. "I want to hear about it," Todd insists. "Everything. Everything they're afraid to show us in school."

A month later, Todd is still listening with morbid fascination to the drunken geezer as he relates his stories, hardly any of which are imposed upon the viewer. Shuffling around his squalid house, wearing raggedy clothes and sporting a goatee, specs and nicotine-stained teeth, Dussander is a pathetic sight, but he still possesses a sharp, imperious manner, and McKellen insidiously conveys the threat of evil yet to emerge



HISTORY LESSON: Brad Renfro and Ian McKellen star in "Apt Pupil," based on a Stephen King novella and directed by Bryan Singer.

from beneath the years of besotted forgetfulness and rationalization.

Todd goes so far as to bring his new friend to dinner, where Dussander tells the boy's parents (Bruce Davison, Ann Dowd) that he spent the war toiling in a hospital.

As if in revenge for the bad dreams and fantasies he begins having (he imagines the boys in his high school gym shower turning into old camp victims, for example), Todd gives Dussander a Christmas present of a pristine Nazi uniform and instructs him to put it on. Complaining that "it itches like hell," Dussander reluctantly obeys Todd's orders to stand at attention and march, but eventually gets into it to the point of becoming a robotic Nazi, marching maniacally and compulsively heiling with arm extended.

His old self thus revived, Dussander warns Todd that he's playing with fire, then veers over the top into some dramatically ludicrous behavior, such as trying to put a stray cat into his oven. For his part, Todd is now so preoccupied by Nazi evil that he can no longer perform sexually and shortly sees his outstanding grades decline to a level that threatens his chances for college.

Story's second half sees the diabolical Dussander managing to turn the tables on Todd, who does some fancy footwork to recoup his standing at school but still can't avoid being further corrupted and, ultimately, morally poisoned by his contact with the long-ago mass murderer. Multiple climaxes extend the story unadvisedly and involve some violent melodrama that's hard to swallow, including a "Carrie"-like resurrection from presumed death.

Aside from this handful of rather coarse story incidents, the main shortcoming is a failure to take Todd's fascination with Dussander far enough, to precisely analyze the attraction evil has for him and, by extension, the potential anyone may have for inhuman acts under certain circumstances. An early scene of Todd sketching swastikas in school suggests a growing capitulation to the external trappings of Nazism and indicates a path that would have taken "Apt Pupil" to an even more disturbing destination than it actually arrives at: Had the film explored the way fascism can pull people under its spell and lead them from their better natures, if it had shown how Dussander's stories played on Todd's latent feelings of superiority to others and infected him with fantasies of power, it really would have been on to something. As it is, Todd's motivation to spend so much time with Dussander seems to stem from little more than a sadistic desire to humiliate the old man for his crimes.

All the same, screenwriter Brandon Boyce, in adapting King's novella, has outfitted the story with a

goodly number of intense confrontations and nasty twists, and Singer has directed with a disciplined approach to maintaining tension and building a malevolent mood.

Although the film adopts Todd's p.o.v., McKellen's Dussander represents its center of attention, and the thesp socks over his performance with outstanding power and the gradual revelation of layers, each one more malignant than the one before. With this and "Gods and Monsters," McKellen is having quite a year onscreen. Renfro goes as far as the conception of his part will allow and holds his own with his distinguished co-star. Of the supporting players, David Schwimmer is quietly effective as a school counselor hoodwinked by Todd and Dussander, and Michael Byrne is devastating as a camp survivor who recognizes Dussander as his tormentor from 40 years earlier.

Modestly budgeted production, which is significantly smaller in scope than Singer's breakthrough second feature, "The Usual Suspects," is smooth in all departments.