

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Mostly Martha

CREDITS:

Director: Sandra Nettelbeck

Original Screenplay: Sandra Nettelbeck

Cast: *Martha Klein* – Martina Gedeck, *Lina Klein* – Maxime Foerste

Mario – Sergio Castellito, *Frida* – Sibylle Canonica

Therapist – August Zirner, *Sam* – Ulrich Thomsen

DIRECTOR: Sandra Nettelbeck

Ms. Nettelbeck was born and raised in Hamburg, where *Bella Martha* takes place, and began studying film at San Francisco State University in 1988. During her years there she produced short 16mm films and videos, one of which, called *A Certain Grace*, won a film festival award. In 1993-94 she worked for German TV and in 1995 she

made her first debut as a writer/director with a film called *Loose Ends*. *Bella Martha* is her first major film and a combination of its gourmet cooking subject matter, its light-hearted treatment, intelligent themes and irresistible characters have made it a worldwide hit.

PRÉCIS – Brian Conboy

Bella Martha (English title “*Mostly Martha*”) is about character types, not only about the character of our two leading personages, but also about how they in turn represent the character of the two nationalities in question – specifically German and Italian. It speaks to the sophistication and complexity of these characterizations that the film’s writer/director, Sandra Nettelbeck, skillfully avoids the common pitfall of creating stereotypes. **Martha** is a head chef in a gourmet restaurant in Hamburg and embodies in innumerable ways both the positive and negative attributes that are commonly held to be German. She is in every way a master of the culinary arts, disciplined, perfectionist and driven to excellence. Her entire worldview is infused with the idealism of cuisine, but it’s an idealism that does not always integrate itself into the practical necessities of the real world. Hence she is intolerant of mendacity and rages often at rude customers who do not appreciate the perfection she is trying to achieve. *Alles ist in Ordnung* in Martha’s kitchen as well as in her personal life. But in creating such an orderly existence she has effectively removed herself from the human world. She is a decidedly cold person, a loner who avoids socializing with her co-workers and spends her days off cooking, but only for herself.

Two events converge in our story to confront Martha’s shortcomings and ultimately to change them. Ms. Nettelbeck’s skill is again apparent here in the characterization of this change and we are given a subtle reasoned transformation rather than a trite cliché. Martha’s sister suddenly dies in an auto accident and Martha must take over the care of the sister’s daughter, 8 year-old **Lina**. Suddenly Martha, with her reserved and austere demeanor, must nurture and console a

traumatized, depressed and difficult child. In a narrative stroke of brilliant but bitter irony, Lina refuses to eat Martha's cooking and all of Martha's culinary prowess is suddenly worthless.

Enter the film's love interest, **Mario**, an Italian sous-chef newly hired by the restaurant's owner. Mario also represents the other side of our national character question as he is in most ways Martha's polar-opposite. Although he is slightly unkempt, a chronic latecomer and not so obsessively organized as Martha, he presents with an easy-going informality and always teems with warmth and enthusiasm. He connects with people so completely and effortlessly and his charm so accentuates Martha's coldness that she is actually threatened by him. The difference in the respective characters is so stark and obvious that one moves easily from the problem of the characters at hand to the question of the nations. The narrative centers on Martha's struggle with these two relationships and her growth as a person.

Early in the film Martha is endlessly prattling on about cooking and cuisine to her therapist, whom she is forced to see by her boss. The therapist comments that this is a long-term pattern and that she might consider addressing the reasons she must attend therapy. It is made painfully clear that Martha has little self-knowledge and little insight into her faults, which are placed front and center in the film for the viewer from the start. As it is Martha's quest in this story to gain self-knowledge, *Bella Martha* the film, examines some of the problems of German character. It is an example of German self-reflection realized through a popular film. It does not choose to examine and critique Italian character but seeks to define the German one through the Italian. Perhaps it is the history of great national catastrophe that brings this self-reflective quality; or perhaps it is the European circumstance of many diverse but closely situated cultures that intermingle readily, sometimes clash and ideally have the capacity to augment one another, as they do in this film.

In the final dessert scene, the perfect *Nachspeise* to a very pleasurable film, the change in Martha, the end result of self-evaluation, is subtle but palpable. She is again discussing food with her therapist, specifically the ingredients to the flan they are eating. She is still a reserved personality and obsessively perfectionist, but the "missing ingredient" they discuss and ponder, previously absent, is this time present. Within her own reserved personality type, she is now fully engaged with her fellow person, facing him, listening and caring.

Guten Appetit.