

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Das schreckliche Mädchen - 1990

Director:

Born in Berlin in 1938, **Michael Verhoeven** was the son of German actor and director Paul Verhoeven (not the famous Dutch/Hollywood director) and German actress Doris Kiesow. He was exposed to film and theater from an early age and acted in both as a youth and young adult in the 1950s. After high school he attended medical school and in 1966 passed the state medical examination to become a doctor. He subsequently abandoned that career and in 1967 directed his first feature film, *Paarungen*, an adoption of Strindberg's *Totentanz*. Since then he has worked continually as a writer and director in film,

television and theater and has won great praise and many awards for such films as *Das schreckliche Mädchen*, *My Mother's Courage*, *Killing Cars* and many others. His films have often been at the forefront of German controversy. *Das schreckliche Mädchen* is a scathing critique of post-war Germany's denial and avoidance of the subject of Nazi persecution of the Jews. His film *O.K* about Vietnam caused a huge controversy at the 1970 Berlin film festival. *Killing Cars* was a thriller with a strong environmental message that came a little ahead of its time. His most recent film is *Enthüllung einer Ehe* (2000).

Precis – Brian Conboy

The film begins with an old traditional German ballad extolling the deeds and valor of great heroes and warriors. And thus our protagonist and her struggle are placed in the oldest of narrative frameworks: the hero, or heroine, and her quest. Tradition ends there as the writer-director, Michael Verhoeven (*The White Rose*), wrestles with the moral complexities of post-war Germany and the modern political world.

The story, based loosely on real-life character Anja Rosmus, takes place in the fictitious Bavarian town of Pflizing and begins with the very average and uneventful childhood of our heroine, **Sonja Rosenberger-Wegmus**. Sonja is played by Lena Stolze who played Sophie Scholl in "The White Rose". Sonja is the first of three children of very normal middle class parents, both teachers in the local Catholic school. As a teenager she participates in a national essay contest with the title theme of "Freedom in Europe." She writes a glowing report; showers praise on Europe's moral and political accomplishments and wins first prize, a trip to Paris. Several years later a second national essay contest with the title theme "My Hometown in the Third Reich" sets her on a path of bitter confrontation with the town elites. Painstakingly and against the determined resistance of many in the town, which at times becomes violent, she probes and eventually exposes the old and comfortable mythology, that Pflizing resisted the Nazis. Sonja's struggle takes her on a veritable roller coaster ride of secrets and scandals revealed, lawsuits, acclaim, notoriety and violence. She

remains defiant until the end, buoyed by her dogged determination and a sense of justice.

Das schreckliche Mädchen won much acclaim and many awards for its many innovative stylistic choices, most conspicuously the frequent use of combination shots. These combine in one frame a separately shot foreground and background and in this film often with jarringly incongruent visual qualities. Often this technique is employed to evoke a sense of the theater and its particular style of set design. Other scenes express a conceptual or metaphoric relationship between foreground and background. Another conspicuous technique in the film is the frequent use of a news reporting style with the characters speaking directly to the camera. This evokes a sense of investigative reporting, the essence of the narrative, and of a courtroom witness, both exemplifying the search for truth. The film frequently moves back and forth from black and white footage to color film, a long established but still effective technique to evoke the movement between older and contemporary time frames. Throughout the film comedy, absurdity and sometimes slapstick are creatively juxtaposed with high drama. Characters often faint (slapstick); Bombs are thrown and tears are shed (drama) and Verhoeven seems to have the unique ability to find just the right gag even while dazzling us with style and depth. Most unique of all is the choice of an open ending, in which our heroine's basic dilemma, the search for truth and the hostility that it brings, remains unresolved.

Vergangenheitsbewältigung, meaning confrontation or coming to terms with the past, is the term Germans apply to their specific experience of dealing with the Nazi period. While the film concentrates on the specific misdeeds and crimes of Pflizing, and by implication of Germany in general, it also touches on broader and more universal political problems. In several comical discussions, one about the word democratic and the another concerning the military junta in Greece, a poor example of "Freedom in Europe", Verhoeven points up the confusion and underlying hypocrisy of western political

rhetoric. But the core of Verhoeven's message can be found in the stark contrast between Sonja's experiences with the two essay contests, so drastically and violently opposite. If one's version of history or reporting of current events conforms to the standard version with all of its mythologies and outright lies then one can expect acclaim and reward. If it doesn't, then watch out. Powerful forces are coming after you.

As *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is Sonja's quest, so it is with Verhoeven and with Germany. That quest, simply put, is truth and Sonja is our champion, our seeker. The irony, well dramatized in this tale of heroines and their deeds, is that the truth is a rare and elusive commodity.