

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Das Versprechen

Credits

Produced: 1994
Length: 115 Minutes
Cast: Corina Harfouch, Meret Becker, August Zimmer, Arian Zollner, Jean Yves Gautier, Eva Mattes, Suzanne Uge, Hans Kremer, Pierre Besson, Tina Engel, Otto Saunder, Hark Bohm
Director: Margarethe von Trotta
Writer: Peter Schneider, Margarethe von Trotta
Cinematography: Franz Rath
Music: Jürgen Knieper

Margarethe von Trotta was born February 21, 1942, and grew up in Düsseldorf. She worked in an office and then went to Paris, where she gained her first experiences with film. After acting in some shorts, she returned to Germany in the early 60s, finished her Abitur (high school) and then started a degree in Fine Arts. She then studied German and Romance languages in Paris and Munich and attended drama school in Munich. She began working as an actress in 1965 at the Stuttgart Theatre. In 1969, she met Volker Schlöndorff, whom she married in 1971.

She became one of the most famous actresses of the New German Film in the following years, starring in movies by Herbert Achternbusch, Rainald Hauff, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. In 1970, she began writing screenplays. In the same year, she worked for the first time as a director (with Volker Schlöndorff, *Der plötzliche Reichtum der armen Leute von Kronbach*).

She became famous as a director in 1975, when she co-directed *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* with Schlöndorff. *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1977) was the first movie she directed by herself. In 1979, she made *Sisters or the Balance of Happiness*. In 1981, she gained international success with *Die bleierne Zeit* (*The German Sisters* or *Marianne and Juliane*). In 1985, she made a film about Rosa Luxemburg with Barbara Sukowa in the title role. In 1989, von Trotta took part in the co-production *Felix* (with other renowned German women filmmakers Helke Sander, Helma Sanders-Brahms, and Christel Buschmann). She currently lives in Paris.

Synopsis of Das Versprechen – Allen Krumm

Margarethe von Trotta mirrors the plight of a divided country in the love of Konrad and Sophie, posing hard questions about the limits of love ("forever never meant waiting forever") and principle ("Ourage is quantitative, it gets used up.") All the figures in this drama are caught up by the conflicting demands and powerful dynamics inherent in both love and politics, and the strong and weak alike are continually forced to make compromises ("A signature for a son") and sometimes indulge in illusions ("the wall won't last long.") or grim humor ("at least they can't divide the shit.") in order to survive. The viewer is given no formulas or simple answers in this film. Margarethe von Trotta strives throughout to show the choices made and the prices paid by the people enmeshed in that place and those times.

East Berlin 1961:

Shortly after the wall goes up a group of young people decide to escape through the sewer system to the west. Two of the group, Sophie and Konrad, are lovers, and at the last moment, as Sophie disappears down the manhole, Konrad trips over his shoelaces as guards appear. "I will

come later” Konrad promises Sophie as he shoves the grate over her upturned gaze. Konrad’s own father turns him in to the Stasi. “We have to go to them before they come to us” he assures Konrad. Thus Konrad and Sophie begin new lives, separated by two walls, a simple one made of cement and a complex one comprised of social, cultural, and political components. Konrad begins his studies to become a physicist, and Sophie learns about the world of high fashion. She still believes Konrad will join her, although her friends have begun to doubt: “How do you know Konrad wants out. We still don’t know why he closed the manhole cover.”

Prague Spring 1968:

Konrad, now a physicist, goes to Prague to deliver a paper, and sends word to Sophie to meet him there. They reunite, still bickering about who was at fault for their separation, but rekindle their love. Konrad decides to stay in Prague for thesis work and Sophie decides to stay with him. Unfortunately the Russians have other plans and Konrad must return to East Germany. Prague has other consequences – the baby Sophie is carrying. She crosses to East Berlin to tell Konrad, wanting to, but Konrad refuses to allow her. He points to the Stasi men who are watching from outside his apartment. “Do you want your child to grow up with them?” Konrad believes he can escape once again via Stockholm while attending a conference. He is encouraged to do so by his staunchly socialist but dying father, who counsels “follow your heart.” But Konrad is thwarted once again when the trip is cancelled, and Sophie gives up. “Please don’t write to me anymore. We each have to live our own lives.”

West Berlin 1980:

Konrad attends another conference and visits Sophie and her husband Gerard. For the first time he sees Alexander, his child by Sophie. Inevitably when they have a moment alone and can speak, Konrad and Sophie debate the past. “Sooner or later you have to accept what happens to you as your life” says Sophie. “You did what you wanted to do, everything else is an illusion.” “I had to learn to live with the options I had...it wasn’t a weakness of mine that kept us apart” replies Konrad. “I have always loved you.” Alexander begins to visit Konrad in East Berlin. On one visit, Konrad takes Alexander to the manhole cover through which Sophie and the others escaped so many years before. Alexander suggests the two of them escape the same way when night comes. Then he reaches over and ties Konrad’s shoelaces. Eventually, because of the peace movement activities of his sister, and because of his brother-in-law’s clash with the authorities, Konrad is no longer allowed to have Alexander visit him in East Berlin. In a rage, Konrad beats up the Stasi man who constantly surveils him and as punishment loses his privileged academic position. He is forced to work as a manual laborer.

Berlin November 1989:

The wall falls, and Konrad, wandering across toward the west, meets and joyously embraces a now nearly grown Alexander, whom he has not seen in several years. Moving on, he sees Sophie and calls out to her. She turns and looks at him, her sorrowful countenance perhaps reflecting the words of another woman on the bridge that night: “For me

it has come too late. When the cage opens after 30 years, you can’t fly anymore.”

Filmography of Margarethe von Trotta

Das Zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages (The Second Awakening of Christa Klages) 1977

Schwwestern Oder Die Balance Des Glücks (Sisters or The Balance of Happiness) 1979

Die Bleierne Zeit (The Leaden Time) 1981

Heller Wahn (Bright Madness) 1982

Rosa Luxemburg 1985

Felix – Episode Eva 1987

Fürchten und Lieben (Fear and Love) 1987

Die Rückkehr (The Return) 1990

Zeit Des Zorns (Time of Fury) 1993

Das Versprechen (The Promise) 1994

Winterkind (Winter’s Child) 1997

Mit Fünfzig küssen Männer anders (Men Kiss Differently At Fifty) 1998

Dunkle Tage (Dark Days) 1998

Jahrestage (The Anniversary) 2000

Bibliography of Margarethe von Trotta

Margarethe von Trotta – “Filmen um zu Überleben” (Filming to Survive)

By Thilo Wydra (Henschel Verlag, Berlin: 2000)