

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Buddenbrooks - 2008

Director: Heinrich Breloer

Screenplay: Heinrich Breloer & Horst Königstein

Cast: Armin Meuller-Stahl (Konsul Jean Buddenbrook); Jessica Schwarz (Tony Buddenbrook); August Diehl (Christian Buddenbrook); Mark Waschke (Thomas Buddenbrook); Iris Berben (Bethsy Buddenbrook); Lea Bosco (Gerda Buddenbrook); Raban Bieling (Hanno Buddenbrook); Justus von Dohnanyi (Bendix Grünlich);

Running Time: 145 minutes

Werktreue – Allen Krumm

Artists strive to show us worlds they have seen. Great artists, without our connivance or consent, make us

intimate inhabitants of worlds they have created. Once resident, we are compelled to respond. Thomas Mann bodied forth such a world in *Buddenbrooks*. He said he wanted to tell his story *ab Ovo* (from the egg) and many years later he described it as “...*Höheres Abschreiben*” (a superior form of copying).

Yet it is anything but that. Seen from one perspective, the story concerns an assemblage of particulars: a particular era, a particular class, a particular family, a particular city, a particular street and a particular house inhabited by unforgettably particular individuals. By some artistic alchemy, all that particularity is rendered universal. Anyone who encounters the story cannot help but hear personal echoes in the intimately universal particularities of Mann’s created world.

Mann composed *Buddenbrooks* over a three year period between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-five (1897–1900). It is a remarkably mature work and his most popular one. Perhaps only a twenty something artist could have written such a novel. Maybe a sense of place and period and family dynamics was so fresh and urgent in his mind that he was compelled to preserve that world in his richly textured, detail drenched prose. Casting a line into the past and drawing it towards his present, Mann transmuted his catch and wove the outward and inward, the public and personal into a fabric of vivid realism and psychological depth that found tremendous resonance in Germany and subsequently with readers all over the world.

Not everyone greeted his work with praise. Some called him a *Nestbeschmutzer*. An offspring of one of the leading families of Lübeck recalled years later: “*Als bald erhob sich in der Generation der damals 40 bis 60 – Jährigen ein Orkan der Entrüstung...*” What angered many most of all was what they saw as the novel’s central thesis of a way of life in irreversible decline. Many of the leading citizens of Lübeck felt their society had made the transition to modern times without losing the original spirit which they believed had made their *Vaterstadt* great.

In actual fact, Lübeck, in the second half of the 19th century, had adjusted more or less successfully to the changing world of technology and the altered political realities of a united Germany. At the time in the 1890s when the Mann family left Lübeck, the merchant class (a mixture of both patrician and parvenu) was still in the ascendant and doing quite well. Of course, a chronicle bound to literal chronology and pedantic detail, or a history thinly veiled in fictional garb, had never been Mann's intent. He once described *Buddenbrooks* as an "...inner biography of the European middle classes."

The decline of the Buddenbrooks family can be construed as a symbol of the displacement of the older patrician bourgeois with the emerging capitalistic bourgeois, as embodied in the Hagenstrom family. Decline is indeed inherent in his work (an early working title was *Abwärts* (downhill)), but it can also be seen as an exploration of decline in one family within that upper bourgeois class, not the entire class itself.

The critic George Lucacs pointed out that the novel actually portrays a cycle of decline and regeneration within a dominant class: the Buddenbrooks take over from the unfortunate Rattenkamps, and then when the Buddenbrooks meet their demise, Hermann Hagenstrom is there to take over. Life goes on with business as usual. The Buddenbrooks were plebeians who became rich and then patrician over the course of several generations. The Hagenstroms are poised to recapitulate the process.

Apropos the subtitle of the original – *Verfall einer Familie* – one must not forget that for Mann, decline or decay does not necessarily bear a negative connotation. Rather, taken in a dialectical sense, the dissolution of traditional forms and values can give birth to new forms and lifestyles. And indeed, in Mann's case, this is precisely what did happen, with his segue from the business milieu of his family into his artistic calling. As Mann put it in his inimitable manner: "...es ist die Lebensuntauglichkeit, welche das Leben steigert, denn sie ist dem Geist verbunden."

Buddenbrooks has been filmed numerous times, despite Mann's original opinion that "...den Roman wirklich in Bildern zu geben, wird wohl unmöglich sein ... man wolle sich grundsätzlich und ausdrücklich darauf beschränken, einen Film 'nach Motiven' aus *Buddenbrooks* herzustellen." Mann's reservations were well founded, since transforming the art of one medium into another is fraught with unavoidable and painfully subjective decisions, in both the technical and philosophical realms. Nonetheless, there have been four productions in Germany, each employing the *Filmsprache* of its era, each evincing its own philosophy about how to make a good film from a great novel.

Gerhard Lamprecht was the first to undertake the task in his 1923 silent feature film. He chose not to create *verfilmte Literatur*, but rather engaged in a free adaptation that strove to capture the themes and spirit of the book. Lamprecht seemed to intuit that, as one film critic put it, it would be better for filmmakers to "*nicht mit Thomas Mann zu konkurrieren.*"

Privately, Mann did not care for the film, although most critics were positive.

Alfred Weidenmann directed the 1959 feature film. The general consensus of critics was that he had created a mere *Unterhaltungsfilm*, capturing visual externalities in a series of episodes, but missing the spirit of the novel. The 1979 German television series was directed by Franz Peter Wirth and was praised for remaining true to both the spirit and structure of the book. Wirth did something right, as his original goal had been to stimulate people to read the book, and his rendition was credited with leading to the sale of a quarter million copies of *Buddenbrooks*.

Heinrich Breloer's 2008 feature film strives for the balance Mann himself achieved between portraying the inner lives of his characters and the outer social world which bounded them. Breloer places a special emphasis on the relationships between the family members, and his selection and arrangement of scenes establishes a

narrative rhythm which aptly conveys the urgent interplay of continuity and change in *Buddenbrooks*.

In the century since it was published there have been many critical and scholarly attempts to isolate the magical appeal of *Buddenbrooks*. What such endeavors repeatedly discover simply reaffirms the prophecy which the critic Samuel Lublinski penned in 1902: "*Er wird wachsen mit der Zeit und noch von vielen Generationen gelesen werden.....*" As for filmmakers, they can only hope that audiences will hear *Werktreue* in the *Filmsprache* they have spoken in retelling the story.