

## THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

### ***Friday Film Fest Series***



### **Effi Briest**

**Director:** Hermine Huntgeburth  
**Producer:** Günter Rohrbach  
**Script:** Volker Einrauch, Novel by Theodore Fontane  
**Cinematography:** Martin Langer  
**Music:** Johan Söderqvist  
**Spieldauer:** 113 minutes  
**Released:** 2009  
**Cast:** Julia Jentsch (Effi); Sebastian Koch (Geert von Insettin); Misel Maticevic (Crampas); Juliane Köhler (Mrs Briest); Thomas Thieme (Mr. Briest); Rüdiger Vogler (Alonzo Gieshubler); Barbara Auer (Johanna)

### ***Effi Redux – Allen Krumm***

Some stories are told over and over again because the story is strange and baffling and we hope that on the next telling we will understand. Other stories are retold because the message is very clear and we simply like to keep hearing that message and having it reaffirmed. And still others stories are retold because different people keep laying claim to the ultimate meaning of the story. It may not be too bold to say that all three categories apply to some degree to Theodore Fontane's *Effi Briest*.

Fontane lovingly yet unflinchingly memorialized the evanescent essence of an era in his most famous novel and in the process illuminated some perennial conundrums of being human. Saturated though it is with a dense *Gebundenheit* of time and place, his work continues to resonate with thinkers and readers and hearers and watchers, which is to say, it keeps getting retold, sometimes in the guise of scholarly analysis, sometimes in translation, and now and again in film.

Whether a question of form or content and whatever the medium, it seems Fontane was on to something. Folks love to keep hearing this story. But why? Rainer Fassbinder, who filmed his own version of the novel in the 1970s, in an interview referred to Fontane's "precise ambiguity." An early contemporary critic referred to Fontane's core technique of *Andeutung* and a current scholar has noted his habit of imbedding *Vorausdeutungskette* in the narrative which are left to the reader to store up and unpack at the appropriate moments.

The child bride Effi is the lovely heart of his story. Of the nineteenth century's great triumvirate of fallen women, she is easily the most charming and Fontane portrays her *Seelenlandschaft* with great psychological acuity. Effi and the other memorable characters of the novel live and move within Fontane's haunting trilogy of *Landschaften*: Hohen Cremmen, Kessin and Berlin.

Hermine Huntgeburth has midwived the latest Effi. She knows her craft, and her perspective can grow on you if you let it. She is adept at atmosphere and mood and with film as her medium can be forgiven for not matching the thick rich detail of Fontane's prose. But she might have taken a lesson from his allusiveness. Ms. Huntgeburth's version is susceptible to a charge of lacking ambiguity and her narrative canvas appears smudged with a few too many feminist fingerprints. Fontane knew his Effi well and respected her autonomy. One has to assume that Huntgeburth knows her Fontane but it is sometimes hard to ascertain how well she knows her own Effi.

Rainer Fassbinder said his version of Effi Briest was really about Fontane. Ms. Huntgeburth's version seems a bit more straightforward, presenting us as it does with a type of the fallen woman unfairly suffering at the hands of a male dominated and tradition bound society. There is an old theme here and ultimately Huntgeburth's Effi follows in the footsteps of some illustrious predecessors, who doubting the fairness or efficacy of any court of appeals in traditional society, dealt with their situations pragmatically as strong women – Tamar and Hester Prynne come to mind as liberated *Ahnfrauen*.

Ms. Huntgeburth likes things to happen on the beach and by devoting a generous portion of scenes to the gentle beauty of the light and the sand dunes and the glittering water she gorgeously evokes the mystical quality of Pomerania's coastline. Fontane had nothing against beaches but he was more inclusive in his use of locales. As an enabling event, a sleigh ride on a wintry night seems much more romantic, even potentially more erotic than a beach house, although admittedly the latter makes it easier to get your characters naked.

The talented ensemble of actors in this film have been orchestrated to decidedly uneven effect. Julia Jentsch is a wonderful actress and very lovely, but simply too old to be Effi. But then again, who really ever could play Effi? Fassbinder had the same problem with Hannah Schygulla. Sebastian Koch is an admirable Instettin, capturing the dutiful decency of that man, always intimating with a hint

of panglossian equanimity via that satisfied civil servant's smile that all is well and all will be well in the Kaiser's Reich, and always showing up, clueless, just after any and all passion in the immediate vicinity has peaked.

The portrayal of Johanna, as played by Barbara Auer, comes very close. Johanna has more than a hint of *Hexerei* in her sharp countenance and knowing looks. Huntgeburth has the good sense to simply unleash Rudiger Vogler, who seems to be having a ball playing the loveable Alonzo Gieshubler. But our *Regisseurin* goes wobbly again with Mother Briest. Fontane was not nearly so hard on that poor woman, but given the feminist orientation which is in play one should probably not be surprised at this director's decision to foreground Frau Briest's machiavellian matrimonial instincts.

Huntgeburth creates a minimally intrusive yet discernable subplot with the subterranean dynamics between Effi and her mother. These currents are allowed to ripple to the surface at opportune moments. Ma is not ashamed that she still loves her daughter's husband, but is capable of genuine outrage that Effi has loved Crampas. In terms of the geometry of elemental passion, the situation here might be construed as much in quadrangular as in triangular terms.

It is Misel Maticcevic as Crampas that lifts and energizes this film. He is marvelous. Perhaps it was simply a perfect match in casting or perhaps his understated charisma is innate. Technique and retakes cannot summon up that conquering rake's smile and the inwardly mournful gaze. One does not have to suspend disbelief to allow him to be Crampas. He is Crampas and Fontane would have recognized him instantly.

Since Fontane gave birth to the first Effi, every Effi has searched to find a home for her love. The restrictive zoning ordinance surrounding Instettin's heart excludes her and Crampas has only a time share to offer. Ms. Huntgeburth has Effi searching for this home like all the other Effis, but she also has Effi stumbling toward an elusive and illusory freedom. Yet she doesn't seem to

want to grant her Effi the stark yet sustaining insight that Crampas has always known, captured so perfectly in Kris Kristopherson's lyric: "...*freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose...*"

Hermine Huntgeburth concludes her contemporary telling of the tale with Effi, a scornful half smile playing across her lips, striding confidently across the Unter den Linden into her unknown but decidedly liberated future, with Instettin, a veritable poster child for a post Women's Lib Male, looking on, a bit baffled, a bit amazed. This won't do. We cannot allow Effi to behave thusly. We need another ultimate interpretation, and quickly. In the meantime, hopefully Ms. Huntgeburth will learn in future undertakings to calibrate her ambiguity more precisely. All this explicitness is a bit nerve wracking. And it wouldn't hurt if she would learn to scratch her head and dutifully echo Pa Briest whenever complexity and uncertainty rear their vexing heads: "*Es ist ein zu weites Feld.*"