

Ernst Lubitsch In Berlin

Director: Robert Fischer

Producer: Loy W. Arnold

Screenplay: Robert Fischer

Cinematography: Manuel Lommel, Jonathan Rho, Michael Rudiger

Music: Aljoscha Zimmermann

Spieldauer: 109 minutes

Cast: Wolfgang Becker, Evy Bettelheim-Bentley, Nicola Lubitsch, Ernst Lubitsch, Enno Patalas, Henny Porten, Tom Tykwer, Jan Christopher Horak

Commentary by A. Krumm

Lubitschland (from *Laughter in Paradise* by Scott Eyman)

Those who have been there call it Lubitschland, and if you should choose to visit, travel light. You won't need much baggage, because in Lubitschland even essentials are essentially irrelevant. Nonetheless, you will tend to stay longer than you had planned, and you will probably want to visit again and whether you do or not, Lubitschland will linger in your thoughts. Be aware that you can enter Lubitschland without a methodological passport and neither will you have any need of an interpreter.

That is because the land of Lubitsch fuses reality and imagination in such a captivating manner that interpretation is irrelevant. Whether you analyze things from the inside out or the outside in or from the top down or the bottom up, you are always enchanted by the shiny surfaces and suffused with the indiscriminating irreverence, snicker inducing cynicism and yet sweetly despairing hopefulness of Ernst Lubitsch's cinematic *Umwelt-Mitwelt*. Maybe that is why in the end academic admirers and fans alike just refer to the Lubitsch Touch, which even Billy Wilder had a hard time describing.

No one ever referred to his comedy as divine; spicy is the adjective most often applied, and it would be impossible to mistake that touch for a caress. The essential sensibility is that of the nebbish farceur, a court jester inflected by the Eastern European Jewish milieu of his childhood in Berlin in the environs of Schönhauser Allee. Prior to finding his *métier* as a director, he began as a nineteen year old actor in Max Reinhardt's Deutsches Theater in 1911.

How much the so called *Rheinhardt Schule* molded Lubitsch continues to be debated, but the basic theatrical experience and the technique of fusing the stage with other forms of popular entertainment are certainly reflected in his later work. Another major influence was the actor Victor Arnold, whom Lubitsch avowedly did consider his mentor. In 1914 he lost both mentor and mother, with Arnold committing suicide at the outbreak of the war and Anna Lubitsch dying in December of that year.

During the war years Lubitsch continued playing comedic roles, but he also began directing shorts, many of which he acted in as well. Whatever that vaunted touch was destined to become, it apparently began as a ribald poke in the ribs, judging by such silent gems as *Meyer aus Berlin* and *Die Bergkatze*. The complementary combination of directing and acting accelerated his development and brought into focus the inimitable style that would make him famous. His first major directorial work, which surprisingly was not a comedy, was *Die Augen der Mumie Ma*, produced in 1918. This was followed in the same year by his first big

success, *Carmen*, released in America as *Gypsy Blood*. Lubitsch left Germany for America in 1922. The sequence which led to his departure may be defined as follows: UFA – EFA - \$\$\$.

In accord with the self-evident truths of neo-Darwinism, the poke adapted, evolved and ultimately emerged as the recognizably subtle touch by the late nineteen twenties in Hollywood. With the advent of sound his toolkit was expanded to include the risqué repartee and double entendre laden dialogue of Samson Raphaelson bouncing back and forth like naughty verbal ping pong balls between all those groomed and gowned lovely ladies and their suave spectrum of male counterparts.

American audiences were titillated by the sophisticated veneer of his stories and the conniving off key innocence of his characters and they loved his relish for skewering every nook and cranny, dignified or otherwise, of the status quo. He could make fun of traditional mores and manners, and just as easily eviscerate Freud and Marx. His films brim with an optimistic, jaunty nihilism which suggests that although it may be that it is indeed libido driven duplicity and larceny all the way down, we might as well laugh at the absurdity of it all.

Hence his willingness to penetrate social surfaces to probe the endless superficiality undergirding all things human. In this sense he actually exhibited a certain compassion for his audiences. As Tom Tykwer puts it, Lubitsch invites his audience to say with him, "I won't despair, no matter what." Yet his relentlessly mocking style arouses the suspicion that he didn't really believe in his own cynicism, perhaps because he wanted quite badly to believe in the love in which he ostensibly disbelieved.

There is often talk of a German Lubitsch or an American Lubitsch, but there was really only ever one Lubitsch and that Lubitsch was a colonist rather than an immigrant. It won't do to posit some Frontier Thesis that sparked a mysterious synergy between Lubitsch and Hollywood. He did not embrace or imbibe much of anything on his arrival in late 1922. He brought his own sensibility with him, and to a considerable extent, his sensibility became Hollywood's.

Ninotchka, *The Shop Around The Corner*, *To Be Or Not To Be* and *Heaven Can Wait* might be considered the exemplars of Lubitsch's oeuvre, the core provinces of Lubitschland. Only Lubitsch could have made a film in which Garbo laughed (believably), or delight us with a woman and a man who detest each other specifically while loving one another anonymously. Only Lubitsch could make a hilarious black comedy set in wartime Poland, or begin a romantic comedy with the protagonist arriving at the antechamber to Hell.

Our *Lubitsch Denkschrift* has denied that one needs a key to determine how Lubitsch works. Not everyone agrees with that. Some fraternal organizations claim that if you look closely you can see the contours of a hermeneutical key reflecting the insights of John Donne: "... *And swear, No where Lives a woman true, and fair...If thou find'st one, let me know ... Though she were true, when you met her ... Yet she Will be, False, ere I come, to two, or three....*" . And there are ideologues, wherever they are on the spectrum, who find the core philosophy of Lubitschland in the sentiments of *Ninotchka*: "We have fewer Russians, but better ones..." Freudians derive their understanding of Lubitschland from a proof text attributed to Cluny Brown: "How's your plumbing?"

There is merit in all of this, but the original thesis stands unimpeached. Lubitschland is Lubitschland, irreducibly and self evidently itself. Interpretation and analysis are beside the

point. The Touch is just there and you can only leave it alone and laugh. Anyone who has ever been there knows this. Even people who've never been there but want to go know this. Speaking for all the citizens of Lubitschland, Klara Novak summed it up when she said: " ... Well I really wouldn't care to scratch your surface, Mr. Kralik..."